

Pentecost 23
11/5/17

NICK AT NIGHT
John 3:1-17 my partner I owned a house
who lived too
far from here on
Lowerline.

Deane
with me

In the 1960's + 70's, I lived in N.O. I was a student at Tulane, and a temp teacher who was permitted to teach because I had agreed to teach in the newly desegregated schools of the opposite race. It was the "Age of Aquarius", folk singers, protests against Viet Nam. You would have felt very comfortable in that climate; it was an age of protest. Some of you will recognize when I say I left NY because I knew where all the gay bars were & I needed to take a long-distance cure. I came to NO a drunk & actually got sober here. I was raised in the Dutch Reformed Church. Dull. The music was very good because ~~it was~~ it was provided by a quartet who were all opera singers making extra money, but the sermons were pretty dull for a 12 yr. Dutch Ref people don't smoke drink, dance & anyone you are not married to and are very strict Calvinists. A woman from work offered to pick me & my two very young sons for church and ~~later~~ when I found the day too I thought I had found freedom.

I look at the 1960s-70s as a time of great change and growth for the church. I was a member of the church in the 1960s and 1970s, and I saw the church grow in many ways. I was a member of the church in the 1960s and 1970s, and I saw the church grow in many ways. I was a member of the church in the 1960s and 1970s, and I saw the church grow in many ways.

New Orleans was always a kind of second home for me. ~~I had~~ ^{in 1940} as a 17yo, I had hitch hiked here from NY & met my first lover that Spring. I was a student nurse in NY & she was a student at the new LSU NO. For 14 years we ~~continued~~ ^{had} a relationship based on when we could get away from our schools & jobs where we lived. I was caring ^{for my elderly guardian} & she was caring for her aging mother, so a move for either of us was impossible.

When we met she was working her way through school playing piano in a cocktail lounge on Chartres Street. We spent a lot of time in a gay bar called the "Personality Lounge" on Chartres & St Philip because it had a piano. It was an old upright against the ^{bar} back wall of the lounge. It was not a very good piano & everyone complained about it. Charles used to say she wished she could bring her own piano, the way the folk singers brought their guitars, after many complaints the owner decided to do something with the instrument. He painted the piano -

I graduated from Tulane in 1972, got a master's in history & went home in June of 1973. I always say I found MCC, feminism, & gay politics all in the first week I was home. Like most people in those days we were afraid of being seen in or around a MCC. I remember walking up & down the street for about 20 minutes before going into All Saints Episcopal where the MCC met. When I did go in, there were 63 men & me. MCC in those days in the Northeast were mainly gay men. I went back about a month later & there was one other woman — a nun. ~~So I~~ I walked Sr Coatsworth back to her residence and we talked about how it was possible to be gay & a Christian. But even MCC was a risk. My new found feminist friends questioned why I would want to belong to a patriarchal religion where all the members were men. The only answer I could think of was Peter's when Jesus asked him "will you leave me, too?" and

I graduated from Tulane in 1976. I
was in the medical school & worked in the
of 1975. I always had a good relationship
with the medical school & the
first week I was there. Life was
really in the hospital. We were
of being there in the morning & the
I remember working up & down the
street for about 20 minutes before
going into the hospital where
the MC met. When I did go in the
week I was there. MC in the
group in the hospital were mainly
gay men. I went back about a month
later & there was one other woman -
a nurse. I worked 2 weeks & then
back to her residence and we talked
about how it was going to be
a good & better. But since MC was
rich. The only friend I found
going to work with I would have to be
the only person who was not
the woman was there. The only
row of the hospital & I was
going to be a good friend
and I was there the day I was

Peter answered "Where would I go.
You have the words of eternal life!"
So I kept going back and reaching
out to other women. I began to
know. ~~know~~ ^{know} there were ~~5~~ ⁵ & eventually ~~15~~ ¹⁵!
I know it is always easier
to avoid taking a risk, but some-
times your sanity demands that
you do (and your politics)

Fr. Henri Nouwen, who wrote a
wonderful little book called "The
Wounded Healer" - a book that
convinced me that even a person
in my history could be used by God.
Anyway, Fr. Nouwen reflected on the
story of Nicodemus:

(Go on from here).

After answered "Where would you
you have the words of eternal life?"
to help you break with the
out to the world. I mean to
that. I mean it is always
- some who take a risk, but some
two years ago. I mean that
(and that's the point)
for their hearts; who create a
wonderful little book called "The
wonderful book" - a book that
can win me the same of
to the world. I mean that
Catholic, the Roman Catholic, the
of the world:
(of our own kind):

Advent 3
12/12/10

"Are You The One Who Is to Come?"

Isaiah 35:1-10, James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

In his book, Horns + Haloes, Wallace Hamilton tells about one of the weirdest auctions in history. It was held in Washington DC in 1926, where 150,000 patented models of old inventions were declared obsolete and placed on the auction block for sale to the public. Prospective buyers & onlookers chuckled as each item was put up for bid; such as a "bed-bug buster," an illuminated cat designed to scare mice away, and a device to prevent snoring. It consisted of a trumpet that reached from the mouth to the ear; and was designed to awaken the snorer & not the neighbors. Also there was an adjustable pulpit that could be raised or lowered according to the height of the preacher. I could see one of those.

Needless to say, this auction of old patent models was worth 150,000 laughs; but when we look deeper, we'd discover that these 150,000 old patent models

also represent 150,000 broken dreams. They represent a mountain of disappointments.

It may seem strange to talk about broken dreams & disappointments this close to Xmas, after all, this is the season to be jolly. But it's not jolly for everybody. I'm a progressive Democrat. This has been a hard week. DADT hasn't passed yet in congress. The SMART treaty to protect us from nuclear warpoxx hasn't passed and the Dream Act for kids who were brought here when they were young and really couldn't say much about it, won't be made citizens if they get at least 2 years of college or join the military. Our Congress just doesn't seem to want to help anybody unless millionaires & billionaires get 100 times the tax break every one else gets. While most of them make 300 times what the rest of us make. Disappointment - just before Xmas. Then there are those who've had a death in the family, who find Xmas depressing & their loved one. And for people who just had their unemployment run out, this is just not the happiest time of the year.

John³ knew about disappointment.

In today's reading, John is in prison and he's looking for a "sign". A sign that the long-awaited Messiah has really arrived. It's ironic because John was the first to announce the Messiah's coming. A lot has happened to John since he was preaching & baptizing in the wilderness, and now he's downcast.

You'll remember that John's message was "Repent, for the D of H has come near." John wasn't afraid to proclaim his message to religious leaders and royalty alike. He wasn't even afraid to proclaim it to King Herod himself. That's why he was in jail.

This was not the King Herod who was the ruler when Jesus was born. This was his son, Herod Antipas, who turned out to be worse than his father. Antipas seduced & later married his brother's wife, but first he killed his brother. The nation was shocked. John³ condemned Herod's behavior & was placed in prison.

While in prison, John realized his career as a prophet would soon be over. His life would be, too.

There was one thing John wanted to know before he died. He wanted to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, if Jesus was really the Messiah. He had given his all, even his very life, for Jesus. He wanted to know if it had all been in vain. Was it all an illusion? Was it a ~~dream~~ dream? In the wilderness, John believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, but in the face of certain death, he had some doubts. He wanted to know, so he sent some of his followers to find Jesus & ask, "Are you the One who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

John³ found himself in a disappoointing & disheartening predicament. Things had not worked out as he had expected.

Sometimes that happens—particularly at Xmas. Xmas isn't always easy. A few years back there was a country song "If we make it thru December". It was December for John³. He was in prison—he was discouraged. He was frightened

and he was disappointed.

First, he was disappointed because he had a different expectation of what the Messiah would do.

John was a product of his time. He expected the same kind of Messiah everyone else expected - one who would drive out the hated Romans & establish the RofG. Why wasn't that happening? What was Jesus waiting for? Why doesn't he drive the Romans out? John was disappointed because of ~~the~~ his faulty expectations.

Leo Buscaglia wrote about that kind of disappointment. He writes: "I was a teen & I remember the sudden appearance under my family's Lucas tree the largest present I had ever hoped to see. It was taller than I was & heavy; and woads of wonders, it had my name on it. For two whole weeks before Xmas, this present towered above all the others & defied all attempts to learn of its contents.

During the weeks leading up to Xmas, all he could think of was his present. He imagined all sorts of terrific presents. On Xmas day the family gathered together. "The main attraction was to be the opening of my present," Buscaglia remembers. "How many times in the past two weeks I had anticipated this moment. "Even as I was opening it, I remember a vague sense of disappointment." The Great Mystery was about to end & I would no longer be able to engage in my soaring dreams."

His present turned out to be a beautiful handmade desk his uncle had built for him. "By this time nothing in the world could have satisfied my expectations. I can't imagine what I expected. Still, that disappointment was a lesson that would last a lifetime."

Sometimes we are disappointed, not because what we receive is bad, but because we have falsely expected so. Sometimes you feel like life has cheated you. Funny thing is that if you lost everything you have now and then suddenly had it restored, you would be exceedingly grateful.

Our problem is not with what we have but our expectations.

John³ expected the Messiah to come by storm, but nothing seemed to be happening. It wasn't Jesus who was at fault, but John's expectations.

The second reason John was disappointed was he was looking for all the wrong signs.

The followers of John³ caught up with Jesus. They asked Jesus John's question, "Are you the One to come or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered "Go tell John what you see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, & the poor have good news brought to them." The Day of the Lord had arrived. There was news that ~~the~~ God's dominion had begun. "Just look around," Jesus told John's followers, "to see what is happening."

Centuries before, the prophet Isaiah had prophesied what would take place

When the Messiah would come. Isaiah said, "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer." These weren't the signs John was looking for. He was looking for something more dramatic. He was looking for thunder + lightning, + he was getting healing.

Clas Kurall, in his travels across the U. S. found what looked like a Xmas tree growing high in the Rocky Mountains. "Trees need good soil + good weather + up here there's no soil + terrible weather," Kurall wrote, "nothing can live up here + certainly not trees. But each year by Xmas day, the tree has become a Xmas tree."

On a barren stretch of US 50, without another tree in sight, grows this Juniper tree. "Nobody remembers who put the first Xma ornament on it - some whimsical motorist years ago." But every year, that tree is decorated. Nobody knows who does it, but each year, by Xmas day, it has become a Xmas tree.

"The tree, which had no business growing there at all had survived all the odds." People who live miles away know + love the tree.

Just looking at it remind you how unexpected life is. The tree is so lonely + so brave that it seems to offer courage to those who pass it, and a message. It is the Xmas message: that there is life + hope even in a rough world. Isaiah wrote: "The wilderness + the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom."

But those aren't the signs we are looking for. We want greatness, but that's not God's way. God chooses to work in little insignificant places in life - like a manger, a carpenter's shop + a cross.

The third reason John was disappointed was because he didn't give God time.

Lincoln Steffens was a little boy who wanted a pony. Christmas was coming + if I couldn't have a pony I didn't want anything. Nothing.

Christmas Day arrived. The children were up at 6:00 AM. "My sisters knelt down, each by her pile of presents; they were squeaking + delight, until they looked up + saw me

standing there in my night shirt - nothing - nothing," the young boy didn't get the pony he wanted more than anything. His sisters joined him in his agony, running back to their bedrooms. Lincoln refused to eat anything. He was too upset. He went out to the stable + his mother came out to comfort him. He noticed his father watching from a window for a couple of hours. This was the worst times ever. No one present.

Then he noticed a man riding a pony down the street - a pony - a brand new saddle - a boy's saddle. The man was reading the numbers on the horses. "He looked at our door + passed by" Steffens remembered. This was the last straw. He threw himself on the ground + began to cry inconsolably. "Say, kid" the stranger asked, "do you know a boy called Lennie Steffens?" "Yes" he sputtered through his tears. "Well," said the stranger, "this is your horse. I've been looking all over for you." The man told Steffens his reasons for being late, but the boy never heard them. "I could hardly wait!" Soon he was riding his pony all over the neighborhood. To this day, he doesn't know whether that was his best Xmas or his worst.

The proxy was coming. It was Leanne's impatience that almost drove him to despair.

We've all been there. God doesn't work according to our schedule, but according to God's. And sometimes God doesn't seem to be working at all. But God is. God wasn't working according to John³'s schedule, but God was working. The fact that we remember John³ 2000 years later is proof that God was working.

What about us? Are our lives filled w/ disappointment because we have unrealistic expectations? Are we looking in all the wrong places to find happiness. Have we learned to "wait upon the Lord?"

Beulahem teaches us about expectations, about signs, & about patience. God begins w/ a simple babe & humble surroundings & God works slowly surely. But God is at work. Let's not lose hope, joy to the world the Lord is come.

Amen.

Answer:

The land is coming.
It's a new land here. Just to the south
about 1000. The God is at work.
I know it's something & it's work
pattern. The design is "single" & about
repetition, about 2000 & about

By the way, the new about

the design is "wait upon the hand."

The design is to find happiness, this

new repetition. The new design in all

to disappointment because the new

what about? The new design filled

year later is part of the design working.

The first the new design is 5000

about 3.5 (about 1000) but the new design

about. The new design working according to

design. The new design is all. Just

according to the design. The new design

according to the new design. The

the new design. The new design is work

design. The new design is about 1000

the new design. The new design is about 1000

the new design. The new design is about 1000

Christmas

12/26/10

A Celebration of Love

Isaiah 9: 2-7, Titus 2: 11-14

Luke 2: 1-20

Have you ever been blamed for something you didn't do? I have two older brothers who were experts at putting the blame for things on their little sister - especially since she was the one who got straight A's and was never in trouble at school while George, especially, got poor grades & worse conduct grades. Once there was a retired admiral who found himself blamed for something that wasn't his fault. He was taking his 8 yo. grandson up to the top of the Empire State Building. Suddenly a young woman turned & slapped the Admiral sharply across the face. The admiral, with great restraint, kept his dignity. As a true gentleman, he said nothing. Up a few floors, the young lady got off the elevator. Then the boy turned and said, "Grandpa, I didn't like that lady." Grandpa said, "Me neither." "I'll tell you why I didn't like her," said the boy. "She stepped on my foot & didn't apologize, so I pinched ~~her~~ her."

think about Mary, expecting a child who's father — if you can believe it — is God. Try feeling that one & see who believes you!!

The Christmas story is one of the greatest stories ever told. A crowded inn with no room, angels speaking, shepherds, a pregnant woman, young, unmarried, traveling w a man she wasn't yet married to, crowds of people trying to get to their home towns, an evil emperor. Such a cast of people as we can only imagine & Luke puts it so simply:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria). And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house & line of David. He went there to register w Mary, ~~his~~ who was pledged to be married to him & was expecting a child. While they were there the time came for the baby to be born, & she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths & placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, & the glory of the Lord shone around them, & they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the city of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths & lying in a manger.

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared to the angel, praising God & saying "Glory to God in the highest, & on earth peace to people on whom his favor rests."

This wonderfully written simple story contains so much. First of all, we see God humbling Himself on our behalf.

It's funny, isn't it? Human beings puff themselves up to appear grander than they are. But God, who is the source

of everything in the universe), humbled
Himself in act of love for you & me.

I was reading some time ago about
Chas. Seymour, 6th Duke of Somerset. Seymour
lived in the 1700's. He was such a snob
that he refused to even talk $\bar{c}$ his servants.
He communicated $\bar{c}$ them ^{only} by sign language.
He also had a number of houses built
along the route from his country estate to
London, so that when he traveled he would
not have to mingle $\bar{c}$ the lower classes in
public inns.

Contrast that $\bar{c}$ God's approach to life.
See God in the person of the baby Jesus,
who wasn't born in a public inn, but
in its stable. By the way, don't put
that down. A stable, probably in a cave,
allowed for more privacy for Mary to have
her baby than if she had had it in the
public courtyard of the typical inn.

Think about God in the person of the
adult Jesus, ministering to lepers, talking
 $\bar{c}$ women of doubtful character. See him
reach out to little children, the blind, the
deaf, physically challenged. Use humans

can he snobs, but not God. God's love will not allow God to stand off at a distance. God came into the world as the most vulnerable thing anyone could imagine, a baby born of an unwed mother. We see in the Xmas story God humbling Himself on our behalf.

Then we see the love of a devoted couple. How devoted are we to our mates. I can't imagine any Lesbian couple staying together if one came home + told her partner she was pregnant because an angel told her she was having a child by the H.S. Honey, her partner would be out of there in a fly second. But Joseph didn't leave. Somehow he knew he could trust Mary. He was devoted to her + to the child she was carrying. Xmas is a celebration not only of God's love, but of human love as well. God thought enough of humans to become one. God thought enough of the human body to take one on, that's what we mean by the word incarnation.

How many times this year in particular have we heard the song "White Xmas." It's the most popular American song ever written. It was written in 1941 & in many ways, like today, there were young soldiers separated from their loved ones a long way from home. "White Xmas" captured powerfully their longing for home.

The years have left youngsters far from home, but in those ^{long} years ago, gay kids often couldn't go home & Xmas was a particularly poignant time for gay teens thrown out of their homes, often on the streets and when they heard "White Xmas" it only hurt the more, because they couldn't imagine when their folks would allow them home for Xmas. Our hearts still yearn to be home for Xmas, & many of us make our own home celebrations aware that we are still not as welcome home at Xmas.

And then there were shepherds. What would Xmas be 3 shepherds? Probably millions of dad's bathrobes ~~over~~ ^{over} the centuries have been used to dramatize the presence of these guests at the first Xmas.

The shepherds represent the least + the lowest in society. They had no social status. And that's important to us. It reminds us of our responsibility to the least + lowest of our own society.

Heyward Brown, a renowned writer of the 1930's + 40's wrote a favorite Xmas story. It was entitled "A Shepherd" and tells the story of a Bethlehem shepherd named Amos, who missed the birth of X. He remained in the flock to tend a frightened sheep giving birth to a lamb. When the other shepherds returned from Bethlehem, one of them asked Amos sarcastically, "Did some great voice from heaven tell you to stay here instead of going to see the Savior?" "No" replied Amos, "but to my heart there came a whisper."

God doesn't expect us to personally save the world, Only God can do that, but we have to do what we can. Pastor Robert in legends needed some money for food for 33 young HIV

affected kids - little kids - 4, 5, 6 y.o. kids. He sent me their pictures and asked if I could reach out and get them some help for Xmas. I asked a couple of friends back home for help & they did help. I didn't have enough money on my personal credit card, but I knew Shirley & I had it, but I didn't have her credit card w/ me, so I used the Church's card knowing that Shirley & I could return it & we have. It was more important to do something, anything for people far worse off than we are in a place where people who are in danger of their very lives are doing something for little ones worse off than they are. The least & the lowest helping each other up only by their bootstraps.

Do you remember what it was like back in the 80's when you went to visit someone in the hospital who had HIV? I do. We had to follow certain procedures. Yellow paper gowns, masks & gloves. Dressed like that it was hard to give someone a hug. Until we noticed that the doctors

came in & touched the patients & didn't seem worried they'd catch something. We don't have to do that now because we know how HIV is spread, not by casual contact, touch, or even sneezing, but know better than exchange body fluids & we hug because we know we can. Imagine being 4 or 6 & nobody will touch you and the only people in your town who will take you in are the gay folks because they know - they've been there.

Jesus said, in Matthew 25, that when we visit the sick, in reality we are visiting X.

If someone hurting crosses your path this ~~this~~ ^{year} you probably won't be able to solve all his/her problems. But if you can do something, even one thing, in the name of Jesus, the angels in heaven will rise up & call you blessed.

So, we have the shepherds reminding us of the least & the lowliest, a God who humbled Himself, and a

young couple clinging to each other for support in the most trying experience they have ever had. More? Angels, wise men who followed a star, a little baby lying where animals usually ate. What more could we ask of a story? Not a single thing. Scripture covered it all. And it reminds us, in the shallowness of the materialism + glitter of our times, of the things that really matter. God, family, our responsibility to others, Xmas. Can we think of anything more beautiful than that. Xmas, a celebration of love.

Who knocked at your door this Xmas? We haven't been able to fix things for everyone but we can always do something. And when we do - we will hear Jesus say "Inasmuch as you did it for one of the ~~the~~ least of these, you did it for me."

Come,

include
that in workshop
not sermon

Gay Pride
Interfaith Service
6/2/11

Inclusivity

Years ago I lived in D.C. I was one of the first white teachers in the previously all-black school

system. I learned a tremendous amount about being inclusive when there were only 10 of us ^{white} crossover teachers in the all-black Desire Housing Project. There is nothing like being a minority to teach one how to be inclusive.

My ^{first} partner was a pianist in a gay bar in D.C. It was a place called the Personality Lounge. It had an old rickety upright piano in the far back of the bar. Not much of a piano. Everybody who played it complained about the piano. Charlene dreaded playing on it. Singers dreaded singing $\bar{c}$ it. Char used to say she wished she could bring her own piano the way the folk-singing guitar players brought their guitars. Finally,

after listening to the musicians' complaints about the piano, the owner decided to do something — he painted the piano.

Well, we do that. Instead of opening our doors to everyone, we redecorate & we're good at it. We understand flash & dazzle.

When I attended my first MCC in NY there were 63 white men and me. Six months later there were 5 women, one of whom was a Catholic nun, Sr. Constance. Not much had changed. So the 5 of us decided we would reach out ~~to~~ to women. We posted flyers in the women's bars, the women's book-store and wherever lesbian women gathered, including the food coop. Six months later we had 34 women coming to the church & I was committed to going into the ministry. Last Sunday I was home in NY at the MCC there, it was truly inclusive. The congregation was men + women, black, white & hispanic, (the pastors) young + old, gay + straight.

were an ex-men, a ^{white} Hispanic evangelical & a vietnamese, Rev. Boon. There were even two little dogs in the congregation. Now, that's inclusivity!

The trouble in trying to be inclusive is that we've all been raised to think "our" way is "the" way. This morning's religion section had a commentary that really got to me. ^{I paraphrase.} Tom Ehrlich of Religion News Service ^{who says}: "The idea that other pathways to God might exist is anathema to us. How could God hear a noa (whatever our group) praying? How could a competing faith, like Judaism or Islam have any claim on God's deluge? How could God care for nonbelievers, for those who find meaning outside the boundaries of a religious institution? But then he goes on to say that these are holdovers from our christian view of God.

We're becoming adults. The LBGTQ1

community is growing up. We're not so rigidly convinced that "our" way is the "only" way. The Interfaith Services which are part of gay pride in every city + most countries realizes that there are many ways to God ~~but~~ however we see + name God, + many ways to be ethical even to God. We're growing up. But we need to be aware that there are places in the world that scare us. Eastern Europe + its orthodox have been beating up GLBT folks along the parade route. I have an email friend in Leganés who tells me the "Kill the Gays" bill promoted by leganés evangelicals did not pass this parliament but is scheduled to be brought up at the next.

Somewhere in California an MCC church lists as its clergy the Buddhist spiritual leader of the gay Buddhist group that meets there. We in our insularity question the wisdom of that, but we do it & learn that

much of what we believe about God is as much custom as it is theology.

We have grown. White pastor pastor black congregations, black pastors pastor predominantly white congregations. Gay men pastor lesbians + lesbians pastor gay men. My last congregation was primarily bears + I went from being "Rev. Mother" to "mama bear".

Let me leave you with this quote about inclusivity: "the world is afraid of the risk takers, the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the trouble-makers, the round pegs in the square holes, the ones who see things differently." That fits those of us who see an inclusive world. We're getting there + there is nothing to fear except the loss of our clannish ideas. I know, I've been there. Amen.

Covenant
6/3/12
Trinity Sunday

"I have a Parade"

Isaiah 6:1-8 John 3:1-17

"Coming in Nicodemus, Going Out Isaiah"

My birthday often falls on Gay Pride Day and I think it's lovely of you'all to throw me that parade!

I spent 11 years in N.O. when my kids were young. I was one of the first white teachers in the previously all-black school system. They called us cross-over teachers. I taught for nearly 11 years. While we lived in NO we had lots of chances to go to Mardi Gras parades. When I first got back to NY in 1973, I was in Greenwich Village and noticed that people seemed to be massing for a parade. The only thing I had read about Gay Pride was a 2" article in Time magazine about the Stonewall riots & here I was just down the street from the Stonewall Inn watching my first gay pride parade form.

The operative word here is watching.
I had been applying for teaching
jobs and wouldn't have been caught
on camera in a gay pride parade. The
chances of that, by the way, were 1:400,000
that year, but what did I know!

I have often said that I found gay
pride, feminism, & Metropolitan
Community Church all in the same
week and my life has never been
the same. A year later a group of
^{from MCC} us were marching in the parade
wearing T-shirts that said on the
back "God is a dyke's best friend."
I was carrying ^{one end of} the banner - one of those
long ones that you can hide behind.
A year after that I was a marshal
along the parade route & pinned a
"I am a lesbian Xian" to a protester
carrying a 7-foot high banner telling
me I was going to hell. He was too
busy fighting a head wind to get the
button off the seal of his trousers &
was stuck at the whole parade route.
The next year I was the grand marshal
of the parade.

Just as my journey as a gay person took years, so had my faith journey. At 16 I stood on the steps of Marble Collegiate Church in NY + told my dad he was a hypocrite. I swore off Church, I thought forever. Many years and too many drunken episodes went by until one day coming toward home after drinking supper, I passed by First Baptist Church in NY + they were singing, I stumbled up the steps + heard the words to "Lord, I'm Coming Home." That was the beginning of my walk toward sobriety and my floundering journey back to Christianity.

A dear elderly coworker at a clinic I worked at in N.C. offered to pick me + my two small sons up for SS + church if I wanted to go. I went because I liked her + probably didn't want to hurt her feelings. I found God again in the So. Baptist Church. I have always said I was raised so conservatively that when

I found the So. Baptists I thought
I'd found freedom. When I went
back home in '73, I heard about
gay churches and went to one called
"The Church of the Beloved Disciple."
It was high Sk Orthodox to my
way of thinking + I had no idea
of what they were doing. A friend
told me about MCC + I went the
following Sunday + never looked
back. I went in Nicodemus +
came out Isaiah. Let me explain
that. Nicodemus was a prominent
Jew at the time of Jesus. He'd heard
about this itinerant preacher who
did miracles. Part of his job as member
of the Sanhedrin - an archon - was
to ferret out false prophets. We
know the story of his coming to Jesus
by night + many questions. Our MCC
met at 7 in the evening in a
borrowed Episcopal church. Like a
lot of folks at that time I walked
by the church a couple of times,
walked around the block + finally
walked in only to find there were

63 men + me. There were no other women there, but I decided to try it again. I went back & this time there was one other woman, a Catholic nun, who probably felt as much out of place as I did but I walked her home & asked some of the many questions I had. How could you be gay & Xian? What was this church for gay people all about? How old was it? Where did it start? But my main question was how could I be gay & Xian? I was Nicodemus "How can you ~~to~~ go back into your mother's womb & be born again." How does this work? I had been going to church for years by then. I had gone back to school - got a degree from So. Baptist Seminary in N.C., had been a SS teacher, supt of a SS and a religious education director, but I had never even questioned how I could be gay & Xian. It never dawned on me that both were possible.

I was religious in every sense of the word, except I wasn't ^{honest} ~~honest~~. I was again like Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee. He had made a promise before 3 others that he would to the best of his ability, keep every one of the rules + regulations that went in the first 5 books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. He would not only keep the Law itself but all the ramifications that law possessed. For example, the 10 commandments say that we must remember the Sabbath day + keep it holy. But to a Pharisee that meant that no work was to be done. None. So for generations Jews tried to figure out what work was and listing the things that could + couldn't be done. The kind of thing they did was this: to tie a knot in the Sabbath was work, but a knot had to be defined. A sailor or a camel driver couldn't tie a knot - that was work. ^{ON} ~~ON~~ the other hand if you could tie ^{or artificial knot} the knot ^{knot} it wouldn't work. A woman could

tie her sash or tie up a tear
in a piece of clothing, that was
modesty + no work. You could
tie the string of sandals or tie up
a skin of mule or oil. But here's
where it gets weird. Suppose
you wanted to let down a bucket
into a well. You couldn't tie a
rope to it that would be work. But
you could tie a woman's sash to
it + let it down in the water,
because tying a woman's sash
wasn't work. To theodemes those
kinds of questions were life + death.
That was religion - that was
serving God.

By the time I got to HCC I was
pretty religious. I knew every-
thing Baptists believed. I had
a degree from a Baptist school +
from Tulane. I was pretty well
educated on religion, but I was
scared + hiding. I didn't know
~~how~~^{How} I could be gay + Christian. I took
Sr. Constance, a Catholic, + my new
pastor patiently teaching me the

working of the H.S. I had heard
the words a million times, but I
never really applied them to me.
I had been born of water - I was
an immersed Baptist - but I didn't
realize the importance + the

meaning of something as simple
as John 3:16. It wasn't up to me.
Jesus had done it all + all I had to
do was believe + the H.S. would do
the rest. You know the verse: For
God so loved the world (all of us) that
he gave the only begotten so that everyone
who believes shall not perish but have
everlasting life. And I heard like
it was the first time. The next verse
"For God did not send Jesus into the
world to condemn the world, but that
thru him the world might be saved."

In the same month I became
a gay Christian, a feminist + an activist.
There was no way I was going
to keep this new knowledge to myself.
Because of my education, I found
myself in demand as a Bible teacher,
particularly the O.T. I mean to work

in the church office because I
could type stencils. I took ~~over~~ ^{OVER}
typing the church bulletin &
finally started taking seminary
classes at NY Theological School
& St. John the Divine. I became
what was known then as an
"exhorter" - student clergy. From
being scared to death I became
an activist & have an old picture
of myself at the Democratic Convention
holding a sign that said in very
large letters "I am a Xbian lesbian."

The Bible says that after Jesus was
crucified, Nicodemus was the one
who provided the myrrh and spices
to anoint the body.

So what did I find out from
Nicodemus? While I found a
new career and a new faith, I
found something more. I
found ~~that~~ a God of love who
loves us more than we can
imagine. I found out that

eternal life isn't "pie in the sky
later on by & by". Eternal life
is in the here & now and that it
colors every relationship we
enter into. I found peace & God
& peace & other people. I found
out that being forgiven means
you have to forgive. And I found
peace & life. I found I had
no reason to keep resenting a
truly messed up childhood - which
is another whole sermon. And lastly
I found peace & myself. I could
indeed be a gay Xian, the best
kind of gay person I could be & the
best kind of Xian I could be & if I
messed up - well, God wasn't there
to condemn me but to find me
& put me back on the path. And
finally, it gave me a new goal.

Remember Isaiah? There he was
in the temple when he had a vision
of God. A mighty, powerful explosion
of a vision. He saw God high & lifted
up & he saw Seraphs - messengers

with wings - three sets - covering their eyes, their privates + flying, & the other two wings made of flames and they were there to attend God and testify to God's majesty. They were singing "holy, holy, holy" just as we do in communion each Sunday. And that's where Isaiah comes in. I found a holy moment & God each Sunday as I learned to truly appreciate communion & the holiness of being & God each Sunday, something I will forever cherish.

As I said I meet in Nicodemus, with lots of questions & I came out Isaiah, singing holy, holy, holy and when asked "Whom shall I send & who will go for us?" I was able to answer "Here I am Lord, send me!"

We're all a little like Nicodemus. We have questions. But the funny thing is that when they're answered

we become more like Isaiah. "Who
will go for us? Here I am, send me."
It's the normal progression when
we're truly at home in God, we want
to go to work in Jesus' hands & feet
in the world. Just me - I've been there.
Amen.

The Parable of the Three Little Billy Goats Gruff

Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17

2 Corinthians 5: 20b-10

(Ash Wednesday)

My administrative assistant at Covenant was a retired Navy Chief who was studying to become a chief. ~~She~~^{Susan} was also in our deacon's Training Class & as part of her training had to be able to preach at least one sermon. I asked her, as Emily asked me, if she would preach the Ash Wednesday meditation. She began to "I can give up everything but butter."

Lent is here & traditionally we are invited to "give up something" or "take on something." I invite us to do both!

Let me explain this way: There is a fairy tale - folk story - called the 3 Little Billy Goats Gruff. They want to get to the hillside where the grass is beautifully green, but they have to cross

a bridge & under the bridge
lives a troll-an ogre. And
little goat after little goat
convince the troll to wait for
the biggest goat brother, and
the troll let them go in hope
of a bigger meal. Well, finally
big brother goat comes along
& he has horses and takes on the
troll & beats him up & throws
him in the water never to be
heard from again.

The OT can be summed up
in one sentence: "It is
humanity trying to get from
the wilderness to the green
places." Our little goats were
trying to get to the green places
but a troll was in their way.
Most of us are trying to get to
the green places but there is
this troll. A long time ago, I
discovered that the troll in my
way was my image of God.
There is this idea in Christianity

And ~~that~~ ^{LENT} its dark imagery
compounds that.

~~that~~ given to us by Calvinism
and, heaven help us, by a
new message called neo-Calvinism
that we are sinners in the
hands of an angry God, "~~that~~ ~~that~~
~~our fate~~ hung by our hair
by God over the fire of hell —
AND in order to escape that we
need to "accept Jesus" & "be
saved," we have to prove
our contrition to God in order
to be accepted, and we have to
believe that Jesus "died for
our sins" so God could accept
us. Someone once said
that makes God an "abusive
parent." Jesus death was all
our fault because we were
sinners! The liturgy of some
churches have no ~~that~~ beat
our breasts & say, "by my
fault, by my most grievous
fault. If I want to change that
idea & I really think that
Jesus wanted us to change
that idea, I instead of "sinners

With his robe flying

in the hands of an angry God, I want to replace that π jeans picture of the Prodigal's father, ~~red man in robe~~, his sandals flapping, his arms outstretched running down the ~~road~~ ^{road} to his child who has messed up every thing who the parent is incredibly happy to see. Because that's my image of God. God is not waiting for me to crawl to ~~him~~ + beg forgiveness, ^{He} God is out there searching + trying to find us + deliriously happy when ~~he does~~, we are found.

For years the "Church" has given us the first picture and ~~the~~ many of the churches that present that picture are full + making money because they feed that message to their followers that we are sinners in need of salvation. ~~But suppose we're not.~~ Suppose ^{the truth is that} we are just simple people trying to get from the wilderness to the green places. Suppose ~~any~~ ^{that} we believe

and listening to them
carefully

~~that~~ that

instead of a toll under the bridge, there is a beckoning figure on the other side who is saying, "Come unto me & I will give you rest." I think when we invite people to be part of the Christian family, we need to spell out ~~the~~ image of God we are inviting them to come hear about & be part of, we need to ask them "What do you believe about God?" and then tell them "This is what I believe about God, — hopefully the person beckoning us to the green places — and if you want to know more about my God come to my Church." Because our God is the one who says: "no matter who you are; no matter where you've come from or where you're going; no matter what you believe or doubt; no matter who you love; God loves you and welcomes you here."

God tells them first about the threat of God, but then he says:

joy of telling people how good
our God is.

Return to me, your God, for I am
gracious & merciful, slow to anger
& abounding in steadfast love &
I relent from punishing." And he
invites us to gather the people
& asks us not to make God a
mockery. And I think, instead
of "where is your God" we need
to ask "who is your God?"

And then to echo Paul who asks
us "On behalf of X, be reconciled
to God - we are putting no obstacle
in anyone's way!" I invite
you to give up the cope & take on the X

Let us help people get from
the wilderness to the green places,
get over the God who is an ogre
and remind them of the God who
has been waiting to love them &
bring them to wholeness.

Help us to ~~remember~~^{share} that every-
thing that we remember in heart
is part of that love that not only
beckons us, but is running to meet
~~us~~^{us} & outstretched arms.

Amen

Graveside of Bill Smith

"Hear the word of our God:

Comfort your hearts with these words: I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, tho' he die, yet shall he live."

I have known Bill for about 20 years. He was a deacon when I was his pastor and we have been close friends through most of those years. More recently we have been having lunch with another friend - lunches that have lasted 3-4 hours, because we have been telling each other our life stories,

Bill has told me of his mother & father and his great love for them, and I was here with him when they buried his mother. Bill was a great "lover." He loved deeply; his parents, his friends, his coworkers - people! It is no wonder he asked for this scripture from 13: v 34 and 35.

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Love creates equals and the odd thing is that the greatest love makes us feel ~~more~~ less equal.

There are 3 premises about love:

1. Those who do not love feel superior to every one else.
2. Those who love feel equal to everyone else.
3. Those who love most will gladly take the lowest place.

Bill was one of those people who were humble. He was a servant because he loved people. It was what made him a great leader.

Carlo Casetti, an Italian Philosopher says:

Each of us can identify our position
along this spectrum, which is the
structure of the spiritual life on earth.
Death for those who do not love.
Life for those who love.
Holiness for those who love much!

Bill found his holiness by
loving much. He had always
been afraid of not being
accepted because he was a
gay man. He saw the movie
"Brokeback Mountain" and it resonated
within the deep spaces of his soul.
He understood the price he was
paying for not being allowed to
love. He fell in love with the poetry
of Walt Whitman, which celebrates
human love. Bill called Whitman's
poetry "the American Psalm."

One of his favorites celebrates
the love + companionship of two
boys:

Two boys together clinging,
One the other never leaving

Up + down the roads going -
North + South excursions making
Power enjoying - elbows stretching
fingers clutching

Armed + fearless - eating, drinking,
sleeping, loving.

No law less than ourselves owning -
sailing, soldiering, thieving,
threatening.

Misers, menials, priests alarming
air breathing, water drinking,
on the turf or on the sea beach
dancing

Cities ^{wrenching} ~~wrenching~~, ease scorning,
statutes mocking, feebleness
chasing

Fulfilling our faray.

A poem which celebrates the joy
of boyhood, which Bill only
came to realize as an adult.

We have to leave Bill here,
but the love he epitomized
we can take with us. The
love of God which transcends
all things.

Leaving Bill in the hands of
our all-loving God, we pray
for God's strength that we may
endure & God's guidance that
we might find our way. May
the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Comfort of the Holy Spirit
keep your hearts until the day
of the ~~glad~~ reunion with loved
ones who have gone on before.

May God bless you & keep you.
May God's countenance be
upon you, & be gracious to you.
May God give you peace, now
& forever more.

Amen

beating him in the house of
our all-loving God, we pray
for that's what it is that we want
and that's what's wonderful that
we might find our way. Now
the three of you find your way
the way of the Holy Spirit
keep your hearts until the day
of the resurrection with us
even when we are over the top.

May that day be a day of
joy and love and peace
and that day be a day of
joy and love and peace, now
I forgive you.

amen

Church-with A Capital C

Epistle: Philippians 4: 11-12

O.T. Ruth 1:1, 6-18

Gospel John 6: 53-58

Shirley & I are planning a wedding & I have this love/hate relationship

to the church! I love the local church, the preaching, the hymns, communion, but I hate, and I guess always have, the part of the church that makes the rules. I have never been much for rules!

^{and Christian}
H.C. Anderson's

Do you remember ~~the~~ fairy tale the Emperor's New Clothes? That story always reminds me of the rule-making part of the church.

A couple of dressmaker types come into town & a great "con". They know that the emperor loves fancy clothes and they sell him on the idea that they have his new fabric. You have to be worthy, good at your job, & one translator says "you have to be pure in heart."

be able to
in order to see it. His Imperial High-
ness doesn't want to admit he
cannot see it, because admitting
would mean he wasn't worthy,
wasn't good at his job (what
emperor would?) or that he
certainly wasn't pure in heart.
The dressmakers go to work + make
this amazing suit of clothes. Of
course, no one can see it, but
no one wants to admit it. Finally
the outfit is done, the Emperor is
ready for his procession in his
new clothes and takes off parading
down the ~~street~~ boulevard in his
purple BVD's. Nobody along the
parade route wants to admit
that they don't see the fabulous
outfit until one little child
blurts out "Mommy, the Emperor
is naked!"

Sometimes the clark is naked;
and its BVD's are showing. The
crazy thing is that this is a
whole lot older than you can
imagine

Last fall I taught, ^a 6 weeks Bible study on the Exile. The book of Ruth takes us to just after the people of Israel & Judah have returned ^{home}. While they were in Exile they kept their identity alive by developing food laws, purity laws, Sabbath observance laws, which set them apart from their captors. Now they were home and ~~they~~ two very rigid men, a priest named Ezra & a scribe named Nehemiah decided that all the laws of the Exile now must be obeyed by everyone - those who had been in Exile & those who weren't good enough to have been taken into Exile, the old, the very young, the infirm and, oh yes, the Jacks the Babylonians had sent into Exile from their native lands into Israel, who had ~~married~~ ^{built houses}, married into Israelite families and adopted the religion of the land that was now home. Ezra & Nehemiah decided that anyone who had married a foreigner had to

break up the marriage and those who
were not married couldn't marry a
foreigner. Oh, and while you were at
it you ^{foreigners} also couldn't be part of ^{the} rebuilding
the ~~destroyed~~ temple. Rules! A lot of people
followed proudly what Ezra & Nehemiah
ordained, but ~~they~~ ^{and} there were voices of
rebellion. One of them was the author
of the Book of Ruth. In the Exile, they had
written the whole story of King David -
who, by the way, may or may not have
ever existed! So the author of Ruth
tells this ~~but~~ ^{lovely} romantic story of
a widow (the ^{unlucky} ~~lowest~~ of the low), her
Moabite daughter-in-law (Moabites
were not only their half relatives, their
enemies but were also some of the
people who had been settled on the
land.) And the noble Jew who is
tricked into rescuing Naomi &
marrying Ruth. To add the topping
on this wedding cake, Ruth becomes
the ancestor of the great King David
^{whom} they may or may not have ^{ever} invented
while they were in Exile. While Ezra
& Nehemiah are making rules about

who could or couldn't belong, the author of Ruth is telling them your enemies, ~~the~~ your foreign neighbors, the rule breakers all around you, not only can belong but they are even more important than you are. Look, this ~~one~~ ^{one of his} David's great grand ma!

Who belongs? Who is inside and who is outside? Religion & especially the Church = a capital C has been dealing with this issue since the BC's.

I could never obey the rules. I ~~kept~~ ^{kept it saying out loud} running away, refusing to be my daddy's compliant little girl. I didn't much like the rules ~~and~~ ^{and} I didn't like the enforcement of them even less. After one last beating for insubordination I left for good. I was 13. I was one of those street kids you see in the news media. But I didn't like the rules of the street any better. There were things that

people did to survive that I just wasn't going to do. I did learn to beg - a skill which came in very handy ^{as a pastor} when I bought a church just down the street from here! I did learn where every soup kitchen was. I could get short term jobs but couldn't keep them because they kept finding out how really young I was. I also discovered how to keep clean. In those days, in the Jewish lower East side there was a public bath. Old tenements didn't all have bathing facilities and the city had a public bath. For a nickel you could take a shower, for a dime you got a clean towel & it. One day I had come from the bath and was making my way through the East Village and came upon a storefront mission. I cannot pass a free book, and there was a shelf of books out front & I stopped to see what they ~~had~~ ^{were}. ~~They also~~ In the store window were stacks of clean, ^{old}, neatly folded clothes and a sign that said "Come in & keep yourself."

The mission was the Catholic Worker, run by the defrocked nun, who apparently also couldn't obey the rules, because she had a child out of wedlock & decided that while the Church & a capital C wouldn't accept her, she had a mission in life that she was not going to be denied. So she started the Catholic Worker movement among the poor & unwanted. I went in to get clean clothes, & came out & a new understanding of God. The ex-nun, of course, was Dorothy Day, & I spent two hours, drinking coffee & eating peanut butter sandwiches - AND - meeting God. She asked what I was doing, living on the street & I shared my story & said that I didn't belong to anyone or belong anywhere ^{and was alone}. I remember that she said Everyone belongs to God & everyone belongs to the family of God. She said no one is ever alone because you always have God with you & God

never abandons anyone. I remember asking her how she could live in a street mission, feeding ^{+ do things} the homeless and she quoted the verses ~~that~~ we read earlier "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little. In all ^{any} circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed + of going hungry, of having plenty + of being in need." ~~I~~ I didn't have it read by in case you don't recognize it the next verse is: "I can do all things thru X who strengthens me."

So I feel in love with God + feel in love with the church. Not her church with a little C but the whole church with a capital C. Because if the church teaches that it doesn't matter who you are, what you have, how you got to where you are, I wanted what she had. Dave Barnhart, who's going to be here next week calls that the "when Harry met Sally" ^{godly} ~~evangelism~~ ^{evangelism}. You remember the scene. "I want

what she's having." I hope he doesn't mind me borrowing it!

So here's where my love/hate relationship $\bar{c}$ the Church $\bar{c}$ a capital C is. I like this God of unconditional love. I like it well enough to have preached it for 45 years. But I don't like Church rules that say just the opposite - that some may come in but others have to stay out. Some are worthy, are good enough at what they do but others aren't pure in heart enough to come in. I don't like the church I love being naked!
*and this time it's very personal
it applies to me!*

Let me tie this to the Gospel:

Jesus is talking about who belongs and he says, really, the only way you are out is if you don't "eat & drink me." Feed off me. One of my theology professors said that means "grow on me," take my word & my being so seriously that you abide in ~~him~~ ^{me} - actual become one $\bar{c}$ him. "I'm ^{Jesus says} not here

I've been told a lot of times
I didn't belong.

Ezra + Nehemiah who gave you
unsatisfactory bread. My bread will
keep you living forever. I'm a
commission junky! I want to eat
both the literal bread of the Eucharist
but I want to eat the figurative
bread as well. I want to know
on X, I want to know him + I
want to know on scripture until
I can know it down to the bare
bones. So I'm in this love/hate
relationship $\in$ the Church* When
people ask why do you keep coming
back when they tell you you don't
belong, *I'm $\in$ Peter "where would
I go, you have the words of eternal
life" (*I let's all ^{know on X} ~~eat + drink~~ the
~~bread + the cup~~ ~~body + blood~~ + remember that
Jesus told the tale and ^{there isn't anyone} ~~no one~~
~~who doesn't belong~~ ~~is turned away~~. Amen

So I keep coming back and one day
I hope I feel worthy enough, good
enough + pure enough for the church
to let me stay.

Ezra & Nehemiah who gave you unsatisfactory bread. My bread will keep you living forever." I'm a communion junky! I want to eat both the literal bread of the Eucharist, but I want to also eat the figurative bread as well. I want to grow on X. I want to know his teaching & I want to grow on scripture until I grow it down to its bare bones. So I'm in this love/hate relationship w/ the church.

I've been told a lot of times I didn't belong. When people ask why do you keep coming back when they cast you out? I guess one day I ~~the~~ figure the church will catch on that we are all worthy, we are all good enough & we are all pure in spirit & let us all stay. So I'm w/ Peter & Jesus asks him "Do you want to go away?" And Peter says "Where would I go, you have the words of eternal life."

when we ^{lets} gather at the table & remember
we are ~~eating~~ at the table Jesus set
and there is no one who doesn't belong

Interfaith 2016

Prayer for Peace

God of the many names the world's languages can imagine, we come as part of the human family to pray for peace; peace between nations, peace among and within our faith communities, peace in our cities and villages, peace in our families, and finally peace within ourselves.

We are "anxious about many things". Our fears become antagonisms between peoples. We fear the outsider, the one who is different, the stranger and often assume that they mean to harm us. Our many nations and races cause ^{us to} distrust, and we assign evil motives to them. Because we do not trust ourselves, we project on to them the very ~~for~~ things we fear in ourselves. Our families become places of misunderstanding and we often flee from them or are pushed out of the very place that should be our security.

We have not learned that "a soft answer turns away wrath" and we say uncounsciousable things about each other. Gender, race, nationality, and even our spiritual communities become places of division, while over us that very spirit ~~who~~ would remind us we are made in the same image, bleed the same shade of blood, break the same fragile bones, and need the same psychological guidance. We have not learned to love each other because we find it hard to love ourselves.

Turn us around. Make us people of love, and out of that love help us to be the peacemakers of the world who have found out of our diversity, unity. Give our better angels charge over us. Keep us from hatred and distrust, as so often we have experienced these very things from others, and we would not do to others that which we would not have done to us. May we be people of peace at home

the fact that I learned that a soft
and gentle approach "and we say
unreasonable things about each
other. Mr. Lee, Mr. Martin Luther
King and his friends of community
have been places of learning, while
even in the early days of the
movement we have made in the
same image that the same shade
of black, think of some people, some
and some the same but different
guidance. We have not learned
to love each other because we
find it hard to love ourselves.
There is no reason, Mr. Lee, no
reason of love and out of that love
help in to the peace makers of
the world who are turning out of our
hands, white, people, people, people
and all of us, we are going over to
from. But we are different, we are
not the same, we are different, we are
different from each other, and we
will not be together that which
we would not know how to love
they were people of peace and love

and abroad, without and within,
Now and forever, we ask this all
in your many names. So be it and
Amen.

and about, without any writing,
New and for ever. The old has all
in your mind and memory. So let it be
Green.

Activism 101

I've been a preacher for the last 45 years, so forgive me if I start in a bible story. (LK 8:22)

Jesus ~~was~~ disciples were fishing on the Sea of Galilee when a huge storm came up. Jesus was in the stern asleep & the disciples woke him, saying "Teacher, didn't you know we were perishing?"

Jesus quietly got up, stilled the storm & asked the disciples "Why were you afraid? Where is your faith?" And it occurred to me at some point that he probably added "Where is your faith? Didn't you know I was in the boat with you?"

I think my ~~life~~ life changed when I realized that I was not alone in the middle of a storm: Jesus was in the boat with me.

I came out as gay - being told I was by my HS class mates who bullied the ~~hell~~ ^{hell} out of me - before I even knew

I was. Apparently I was one of those young gay / lesbian kids who can't hide who they are because at 14 as a run away kid who refused to go home was put to the My Children's Shelter and a young African-American girl asked me, "Are you a topper?" which was the slang of the time for a "butch" in certain communities. HS was no different in the 40's than it is today. There are kids who get you & accept you for who you are & there are the kids who make your life hell. I was a scared kid who had not learned to fight back. but I certainly got a good taste of what oppressors felt like at an early age. At 16, I was a student nurse in a Methodist Hospital, who learned very quickly that God was not my friend, that I was an abomination and I was hell-bound in very short order. I gave up on Christianity about that time and with a lot of

Other progressive young kids
became part of the Young Communists
League. It was there I learned
how to fight back. I spent a
lot of my spare time riding a
round truck trying to get a
long manist friend, Vito Marc-
antonio, elected to City Council.
That worked until I found out
Communists didn't like gay kids
any more than the Church did.
Alone, rejected by ^{my} family, my
religion, & my politics, I began
~~drinking~~ drinking far too much. My
weekends began on Thursday &
often on Monday I was too hung-
over to make it to work. I
got fired at Mt. Sinai for being
drunk on the job & referred to
a psychiatrist - probably the best
thing that ever happened to me.
For the next 7 years I sat across
from her, trying to come to grips
with years of isolation, anger,
and hopelessness. Two things stand
out ^{that she said} in those years, "Your father messed

up the first half of your life. If you let him, he can mess up the 2nd half." and "When you can bring your homosexuality & your religion together, you will understand better how to live."

I don't think she knew how important both of those were in my life.

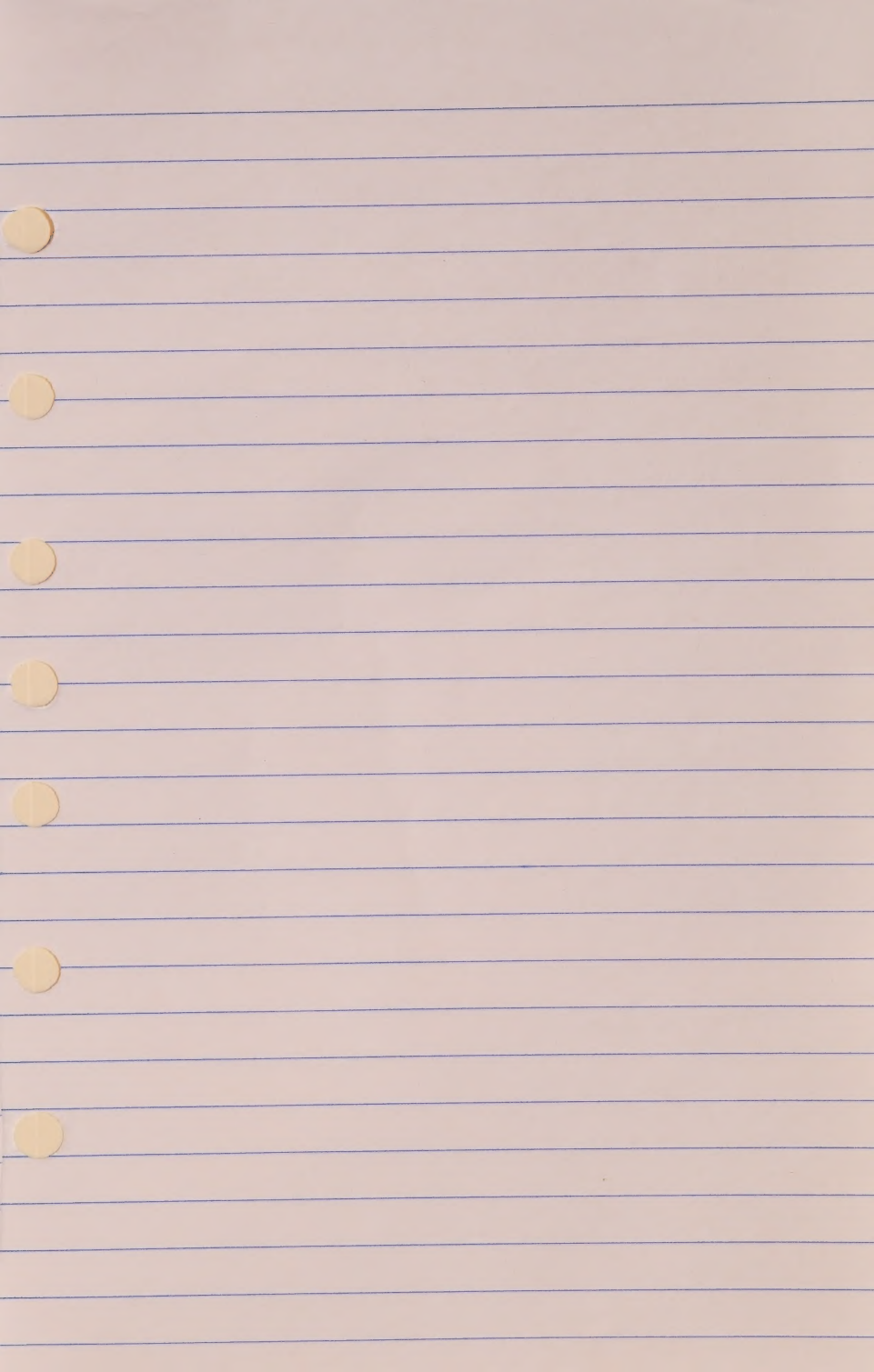
In 1957, my best friend, a gay man — and thru the years some of my best friends have been gay men — some of my "mothers" have been gay men! and I were drinking too much and decrying the fact that too such intelligent beings as us were being closed out of the que pool. (Well, we were drunk!) and decided to do something about it. That year & the next year we became the parents of the wonderful boys, David & Jonathan. At that time - 1958 or 1959 - that was a very different & unique thing to do. If anyone had children from a marriage, they certainly

wereⁿ talking about it, but I
wasn't keeping it a secret. I lost
friends over it. At the time it was
seen as proof that you weren't
fully gay & committed to your
own oppression, but trying to pass
or fit in. In 1962, my lover from
(when I was 17 & she was 18 decided
to get together permanently in N. O.
She accepted & loved my kids, now
2 & 3, found us an apartment &
we became the first gay family
I had ever heard of. In 1964, she
saw a notice at her school that
the K. O. schools were looking for
teachers who were willing to
cross the color line & become
teachers in the newly desegregated
schools. The federal govt would
pay for part of your education,
exempt you from student teaching
because you would have
seminars relating to the schools
you would be in, & have
a salary teaching credentials.
Four of us from uptown N. O.

applied & were sent to the Desire
Housing Project. We decided to
check out our new school, &
found that there were bullet
scars in the front of it from a
battle that had just occurred
between the U.O.P.D & the Black
Panthers. I cut my teeth on
activism working for not
only desegregation but inte-
gration of the schools as the
only way to get a fair shot
at education for my students.
It was at that school that
I came out publicly at work,
an extremely dangerous thing
to do in the 60's. My partner
had epilepsy & had a seizure
on the school yard. Our principal
sent for me, called the ambulance
which took patients to Charity
Hosp from Desire. As she closed
the ambulance door, Mrs. Smith
said, "Take Helen home, get her
the medical care she needs. I
don't want to see either of you

for 3 days. When I returned, she
called me in the office and
said "I got one word of this goes
on Helen's file & I don't care
what your relationship is, you
are two of my best teachers &
I don't want to lose either of you".
So - I'm out at work, out at
school because ^{at Tulane} my professor
of ~~Baruch~~ Am writers is the church
organist at First Baptist ch is my
other source of income, since I
am on the staff of the Xtran Ed
dept. But it is still the ~~early~~ ^{mid}
60's, it's still the deep south,
& I am not at all comfortable
being this visible, but I
am also becoming more vocal
in the university community
which has its first gay student
organization. That openness
led to the end of my relation-
ships. It was beginning to be
scary to be known & seen & me.
~~I lost my church job~~. I had
another child, when I allowed

myself to listen to folks at church
convince me that once more
"The Bible says..." + I could not
raise my boys alone. I tried
heterosexual marriage. It was
useful for me. After Eliza was born
I ended my marriage, which
ended my church job, & within
another couple of years, when I
graduated from Yale and got
my Master's in History, I decided
to go home to N.Y.



Trinity Sunday
4/30/10

What Do You Know About God?
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5
John 16:12-15

A woman was teaching 3rd Grade in a large elementary school. One morning all of the teachers were called to the teachers' lounge for an emergency meeting & they hurried over, leaving their classes unsupervised. Everyone was worried, but none as much as Ms. Whiting, because her class of 1 graders was especially mischievous & unruly.

When they got to the teachers' lounge, Ms. Whiting said, "I think I had better listen in & find out what's going on in my classroom. She turned on the intercom & sure enough her room was in chaos. Children were yelling, jumping & throwing things. But one voice shrieked out above all the others. Ms. Whiting recognized the piercing voice. She picked up the microphone & in her sternest voice said, "Elizabeth, sit down!" Immediately, the room got silent. After a few seconds ^{small} a humble voice answered meekly, "yes, God."

Teachers know all about intercoms & megaphones, but little Elizabeth, from her perspective, could think of only one explanation for a voice coming out of nowhere & admonishing her by name.

What do we know about God? Certainly we're more sophisticated than Elizabeth. But what do we really know about God?

Today is Trinity Sunday. Today we celebrate God, the Creator, Jesus the Christ, the H.S. John Wesley once said, "Show me a woman that can comprehend a human being & then I will show you a human being that can comprehend the Triune God." Martin Luther's comment is even more to the point, "To try to comprehend the Trinity endangers your sanity." And one of my favorite professors, Justo Gonzalez, once said, "Trinity is a mystery, not a puzzle. You try to solve a puzzle; you stand in awe of a mystery."

The church fathers, those long ago, early Christian writers of the first few centuries of Christianity, used examples to explain the Trinity.

they said, "Look at a tree if you want to try to understand God. There is the root, the trunk & the fruit. The root is like God the Creator, invisible, but you know it is there. The trunk is like God the Christ, sent forth by the Creator, visible & tangible. The branches & the fruit are like the H.S. We are connected to X thru the Spirit dwelling in us, & by the power of the spirit we bear fruit in the world.

Or look at a stream: the water rises from a source, but that source is usually hidden. The source of the stream is like God the Creator; the stream which we can see is like Jesus the X, visible because it flows from the one who sent him; but the water, as it flows into the fields, irrigating the plants & giving them life, allowing them to bring forth a harvest is like the H.S.

Or look at the light. The light comes from the sun, the source of light, but we see the light most clearly when it pierces thru the clouds as a sunbeam. When we are sitting in a room & the light shines in & touches us, we are warmed

and can feel the light. So, the sun is like God the Creator, the beam like the λ , & warmth like the HS.

What each of these illustrations has in common is that they are all analogies. God isn't the tree or the stream or the light but like them. All our language about God can only hint at the reality, never grasp or contain God in one image. A Zen proverb says, "the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon." All our language about God is not God. We talk about God as Creator, father, Christ or Son, and the HG or HS. None of these names is God - they are just ways of talking about God.

Wisdom is another of the ways we talk about God. ~~Before there was a Jesus, there was wisdom.~~

I have a question for you, but right up front you must know that it's a trick question. "What did God create first?"

If you're like most Bible readers, your mind will immediately go to Genesis.

And then it's a matter of trying to recall what part of the world God created first. In case you can't remember, it was the creation of light. Genesis says that in the beginning, "darkness covered the face of the deep." So as the first step, God said, "Let there be light," & the Bible says, light came into being.

But remember I said it was a trick question, so light is not the answer I was looking for. My question was not "which part of the world God created first" but "what did God create first?" The Bible answers that not from Genesis 1 but from Proverbs 8. Actually, there may have been many creative acts God did before creating the world, but the first one the Bible records is God's creation of wisdom. In Proverbs 8, wisdom, speaking in the first person says, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago."

Taken literally, that verse means that wisdom was created before the creation of the world.

What's more, in that same chapter, Wisdom, which is really an attribute of God, is personified as a woman. Bear in mind that Wisdom - like Jesus or the HS, is not a separate individual, but a characteristic of God, on whom the biblical people put a female face, to make it more understandable.

In any case, this woman - personification of God, Wisdom, says that while God was marking out the foundations of the earth, she was beside him. In other words, Wisdom was God's companion in the process of creating the world.

It's like God created the understanding God would need in order to do the creating. Another thing, would be to say that God ^{made} some measure of divineness in the world God created.

In OT thought, there was the view that God had built the world + life itself to run best in certain logical ways. The idea was that if you could figure out what those ways were + then do your best to cooperate $\bar{c}$ them, your life would be happier + you would have well-being.

This understanding of life was called "wisdom" and as the word is

used in the OT, wisdom can be a skill, a body of knowledge, or an attribute of God.

There were people, in those times, who devoted their lives to discovering what God's wisdom consisted of. Some were prophets + priests, but others, like

Cana + Simeon in the NT, were just ^{ordinary} people known as "the wise."

Some were employed by kings to advise them on affairs of state and on personal matters as well. They issued

their ~~saying~~ teachings as sayings, fables, oracles, epics, poetry + mythos.

Eventually there became a whole body of writings known as wisdom

literature. In the OT, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job + some of the Psalms are part of this great category of writing.

Wisdom texts are intentionally instructive, focussing on how one should act so as to make one's way successfully in the world while remaining righteous.

In Proverbs 8, wisdom is presenting her credentials. By portraying herself as the first of God's creations + having been there at the birthing of the world, wisdom is not claiming to be equal to God but she is telling of her honored place next to God because she wants her audience to heed her instructions, something they will only do if they are convinced she is right. She wants them to listen, for she knows the value of her teaching. As she states it, "For whoever finds me finds life + obtains favor from the Lord."

So what does that have to say to us today? We believe God has constructed life so that it functions best in certain logical ways. And if so, then it makes sense to try to cooperate in the laws of operation God has implanted in life if we want to be happy, healthy + whole. But really, in a complex world, how do we know what those principles are? Proverbs is full of genuine down-to-earth advice on how to get along well in life. But there's more than that. Here's how it reads in Proverbs:

"when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was his daily delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world."

Wisdom can be both a "master worker" and "his little child." And this portion follows: "Then I was by his side each day, his darling & delight, playing in his presence continually, playing over his whole world, while my delight was in humankind."

Both translations make clear that Wisdom took great joy in the creation of human beings, but the second enables us to see Wisdom as a ^{SQUEALING} giggling child, watching & great delight as God does marvelous things, like creating humanity. She has great joy because of what God has made, & she finds human beings to be wonderful. In effect, what Wisdom is saying is "I remember as a child what great joy it was to watch God make you as God intended you to be."

And for us that means that God's wisdom wants any who have strayed from the goodness in which God created us to come back + be wisdom's delight again. Or to say it another way, perhaps the greatest benefit of the pursuit of the meaning of life is not the answers we find, but the Creator we meet when we really search for wisdom.

In Colossians, Paul identifies Jesus as the "firstborn of all creation." This goes along w the OT Trinity of Shekinah (God) Chochma (wisdom) + Kuach (HS). John talks of Jesus being the word, which ~~is~~ is the Gk equivalent of the word of wisdom. Jesus is often equated w Chochma. There are all characteristics of God and identifying Jesus as coming from God + participating in the creation is a way of saying that the ^{wisdom} ~~wisdom~~ that dwells in God dwells in Jesus also.

The writers of Proverbs did not know Jesus, but from their point of view, they found it perfectly acceptable to urge people to seek wisdom rather than urging them to seek God directly, for the reality is, seekers cannot go far toward wisdom w/out encountering God.

A NY psychologist, Henry Link, because of his study of psychology, gave up Christianity as outmoded superstition. As he began treating patients, however, trying to help them untangle their snarled up lives, he realized that he had to give them something outside of themselves to love. That made sense + was a wise ~~solution~~ decision, but to what should he direct them? He eventually realized that the only permanent thing he could direct them to was God. And after realizing that, he found that he had talked himself back into being a Christian.

Proverbs tells us that God intended us from the beginning, to be wisdom's delight - God's delight really. And by planting in us the urge to understand life, God also gave a path that leads back to God.

To sum up, go ahead + look diligently for the meaning of life + for the principles that make life work best. Be aware these are not ends in themselves for the further you go in pursuit of them,

the closer you are to come to God, God
delights in you and says that the
beginning of wisdom is to delight
in God.

Amen

Pentecost 3

6/6/10

From Funeral Procession to Parade
or Does Jesus Care?

1 Kings 17: 8-24, Galatians 1: 11-24

Luke 7: 11-17

Notre Dame football coach Lou Holtz

Talked about his coaching career:

"I've been at the top & I've been at the bottom. At Arkansas my first year, we won the Orange Bowl. Then everybody loved me. They put me in the Arkansas Hall of Fame and issued a commemorative stamp in my honor. The next year we lost to Texas and they had to take away the stamp.

People kept spitting at the wrong side."
"One year I tried to sell cemetery plots for a living. My wife told me I couldn't sell anything. She was wrong. That summer I sold our car, our TV, our ^{stereo}.

Sometimes we have it made. Sometimes we don't. Think we can make it. Death is like that. At the height of the AIDS pandemic I buried a lot of people. Karen Zigler, who was pastor at NY at that time buried so many people that she

gave up ministry and became a nurse, figuring she could be of more benefit that way.

Did you know that the first president of the US to refuse to use the Bible at his inauguration was Franklin Pierce? The reason is interesting. When Pierce won the election, he & Mrs. Pierce & their son, two weeks before the inauguration, were taking a trip to Concord, N.H. and, of course, they were going by train. The train had not gone far out of the station when there was a lurch, a jolt & the car the Pierces were in tumbled off the tracks and down an embankment. Neither the President nor his wife were injured in the accident, but their son was killed. Franklin Pierce brooded over this, as most of us would. He asked of God why - at this moment of triumph - would God allow this tragedy in their lives? He was so upset that he refused to allow the Bible to be used at the inauguration.

It's a dramatic scene we come upon

in this morning's gospel. A funeral procession is halted and the trip to the cemetery interrupted. Of course, it wasn't anything like our scenes—a black Cadillac hearse, followed by one or more Cadillac limousines, followed by several cars, lights on, concerned not to lose their place in the line of traffic.

No, this scene was at once more primitive & more personal. There was no city traffic to contend with, no indifferent motorists disturbed that they were delayed a few moments for the funeral. No, this is a village scene, the whole town on foot, following the widowed mother who is following the professional mourners with their cymbals, flutes & high-pitched shrieking and wailing.

It's a Palestinian village scene in Nain, just a short distance from Nazareth and a day's walk from Capernaum which is Jesus' center for his ministry. The pallbearers are carrying the body of a young man

in a long wicker basket covered by a shroud for burial outside the city. Except for very important people, ancient Jews buried their dead outside the city, usually on the day of death or the very next day. They still do. Embalming was not practised & in the hot desert they needed burial to be immediate.

Think of it: the dead young man was the only son of his mother & she was a widow. The pathos & sorrow of the timer was contained in that sentence. In a patriarchal society, orphans & widows - like these two - were regarded as vulnerable, weak, & without much opportunity for economic support. Nonetheless, a great crowd followed the procession, indicating sympathy & support at least for the time being.

That would be pretty dramatic, but now there is more, Jesus approaches, apparently coming from Capernaum where he has just healed the Centurion's boy. He saw the widowed, desolate mother,

had compassion for her — maybe thinking of his own mother, widowed at an early age.

"Do not weep." And risking ritual impurity, he reached out, touched the wicker basket & possibly the body, and the procession halted.

Can you see it today? Someone taps the hearse, opens the door of the limousine, telling the widowed mother dressed in black not to weep, and then saying, "Young man, I say to you arise!" Startling now & startling in first century Palestine which had a tradition of miracle stories of great prophets like Elijah & Elisha raising widow's sons from the dead. And the young man sat up and began to speak, & like Elijah & Elisha, this new great prophet gave the son back to the mother.

Talk about rising above discouragement! Talk about overcoming obstacles. Talk about overcoming life's defeats — this was it.

Jesus raised this young man, just as
he had raised Jairus' daughter +
Lazarus, brother of Mary + Martha.

Jesus didn't raise every body physically
from the dead + he didn't heal everybody.
But what he did then + he does now is
come to us in our distress + change things.
The widow of Nain had been heartbroken
and Jesus saw and Jesus cared.

That's the good news for today. We think,
when everything is going against us,
"No one knows what I am going, thru
right now." But someone does know.
Why do we have a savior who died on a
cross? Maybe it's because that way
someone understands our loneliness +
despair. Why? Because he's been there.
A couple of years ago, the NY Daily News
carried a story about a TV news anchor
woman named Pat Harper who left her
luxurious East Side apartment + \$80 cents in
her pocket + spent five days living on
the street "to learn what it's like to be
homeless." She spent the days wandering

the streets in the icy January rains
& her nights sleeping in doorways,
train stations and public shelters.
She began to realize that most of
the homeless people were not much
different than she was. Several people
helped, giving her food & how ^{she was kept} to
survive & money. The undercover
investigation made her realize that
many homeless people are simply
normal people who have been hit &
financial problems from which
they have not been able to rebound.
There was no other way to know
how they felt than for this successful
media person to walk where the
homeless walk.

There was someone else who left
comfort & convenience to walk
where we walk. This was the same
Jesus who took compassion on
the widow of Nain. That is essentially
the message of the Cross. Jesus has
walked where we walk. When
we have to walk thru suffering, he
walks with us. That has always been

the hope of people whose dreams have been dashed, whose burdens seem unbearable.

There is another man to remember. Just before this a Centurion - a Roman officer in charge of 100 soldiers - came to Jesus and asked him to heal his "boy" - his military servant boy. We know that it was customary for Roman officers to use these boys sexually and apparently this officer loves the boy. Jesus doesn't ask questions, he accepts the centurion's faith and heals the boy. Jesus goes on to say that he has not seen faith like that which the Centurion has. Again & again in the Gospels we hear Jesus say, "your faith has made you whole." But the widow of Nain is different. She exhibits no great faith. It may be that she just thinks it's too late. There is no evidence that she even notices or knows who Jesus is. She is too caught up in her grief to do anything but cry.

There is no suggestion that she doesn't approach Jesus because she lacks faith.

There is no evidence that she or her son even say Thank you. Luke does not record any response from her at all. More than likely, both the woman + her son joined in the celebration of the crowd, but Luke doesn't mention it. In most of Luke's Gospel, Jesus heals people because of the faith they have shown, or on the occasion when the healing is not requested, there is great expression of thanks or praise to God after the person has been made well.

In today's story, there is no word about faith, and nothing is said about thankfulness. We have only a mother's tears and a son's unrecorded words. There is only one thing left - grace. Jesus didn't Resurrect this young man because of the mother's faith in God, or because the young man deserved a second chance at life. Jesus performed a miracle because, quite simply, he had compassion for the widow. This was authentic -

undeserved, unasked for grace. Perhaps the mother was very faithful and maybe the son was righteous. The story, though, says much more about Jesus than either the widow or the son. It tells us that when we are given grace we only have to decide whether or not to accept it. No other action is required.

Context is important. If we are told a group of people are coming down the street, there may be any number of reasons. They may be an angry protest march, a gay pride parade, a military maneuver or perhaps a funeral procession, we have no way of knowing anything about this group's progression unless we are given clues to the purpose for the gathering.

Our gospel text today gives a context, a background, for how we can experience life. We can despair & turn away from God. We can find the strength thru God, to carry on. Or, we can remember that $\bar{c}$ God, our context is always grace, - undeserved love & mercy. It reminds us, where Jesus is concerned, a parade can break out anywhere, even in the middle of a funeral procession. It is

time for us to celebrate - the people
of Nain & cry out, "God has looked
favorably on God's people," ~~And~~
we are God's people & God has
looked favorably on us.

Amen -

There are a lot of people in the world
who are not happy. They are not
happy because they are not
happy. They are not happy
because they are not happy.
They are not happy because
they are not happy. They are
not happy because they are
not happy. They are not happy
because they are not happy.

3rd after Pentecost
6/13/10

Liberated Women

1 Kings 21: 1-21a, Galatians 5: 15-21

Luke 7: 36 - 8: 3

Barbara Walters of The View, did a story for 20/20 on gender roles in Kabul, Afghanistan, several years before the current Afghan war. She noted that women customarily walked 5 paces behind their husbands.

She recently returned to Kabul + observed that the women still walk behind their husbands. From Ms. Walters's vantage point, despite the overthrow of the oppressive Taliban regime, the women now seem to walk even farther back behind their husbands, & are happy to maintain the old custom.

Ms. Walters approached one of the Afghan women & asked, "Why do you now seem happy in an old custom that you once tried desperately to change?"

The woman looked Ms. Walters straight in the eyes, and in hesitation said, "Land mines."

Moral of the story; no matter what language you speak or where you go: Behind every man, there's a smart woman.

I want us to pay attention to the 8th chapter of Luke, the first 3 verses. "~~After~~ "After this, Jesus traveled about from one town & village to another, proclaiming the good news of the Do of G. The 12 were there + him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits & diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom 7 spirits had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means."

Most of us think of Jesus traveling around the countryside + his 12 male companions. We seldom give much thought to the fact that there were also women traveling + them. Were there some wives of the disciples? And whatever happened to Simon Peter's wife? We know the impetuous fisherman was married because we have

the story of Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law. Maybe his wife was part of the company.

These women that Luke mentions were liberated women before liberated women became fashionable. These women probably traveled together not only to maintain a sense of respectability, but for security & support. Women have learned there is strength in mutual support, both physically & emotionally. But have no doubt these were liberated women.

In Mary Magdalene's case, the liberation was literal. Jesus had liberated her from "7 demons". We don't know what 7 demons means. Maybe Mary had multiple personality disorder which I doubt. History has labeled Magdalene as a woman of ill repute before she encountered Jesus. That's speculation, because nowhere in the NT does it say that about her. All we know is that she had some serious problems before she met Jesus. And Jesus healed her. Jesus can do that. Jesus can

take some seriously broken people and help them get themselves back together. At some time in most of our lives all of us will need to be put back together.

Mary Magdalene was liberated, to be sure. But notice the second woman - Joanna. Luke describes her as the "wife of Chuza^{Chuzza}, the manager of Herod's household." This woman evidently held significant social + political standing. Her husband worked for King Herod himself. Anyone remember our stories of Herod Antipas from Xmas? His story tells us he was a cruel + licentious man. Joanna took some real risks to be in the group of women following Jesus. I wonder how her husband felt about it?

Remember that Luke describes this woman as having been "cured of evil spirits + diseases." Maybe Joanna^{Chuzza} had suffered a dread disease + Chuza watched helplessly as his beloved wife waited away. But then Jesus happened + healed her. And now she traveled in women supporting Jesus' ministry. Did Chuza approve? Was Chuza one of "the way." I hope so, but we will never know.

There were Susanna + others. Luke tells us "these women were helping to support Jesus + the disciples out of their own means." This was remarkable. This was a culture where women had no legal rights. They were not regarded as persons - they were things. They were the possessions of their fathers or husbands. Whoever the significant man in their lives they were at his disposal to do with them as he chose. Remember the daily prayer of the observant Jew: "I thank God that I am not a dog, a Gentile, a slave or a woman." And yet these women supported Jesus out of their own means.

These things didn't end in the ancient world. Do you remember learning about Eli Whitney? Whitney's cotton gin, patented in 1793, was considered the single most important American invention up to that time. It revolutionized American agriculture and especially in the South made Whitney a legend.

It wasn't his idea. Catherine Edfield Greene, mistress of a Georgia plantation, was the first to theorize a machine capable of stripping seeds from balls of cotton. Whitney was a guest at Catherine Greene's home. She supported him for 6 months & added final touches to the model he eventually made famous. Although Whitney never became rich as a result of his invention, he did become famous, while we never hear of Mrs. Greene).

She proposed the idea, financed it, & made the final alterations to it, nevertheless Whitney registered it under his name).

That's the way of the world. And hopefully it's getting rare. The women who followed Jesus were prevented by the culture in which they lived to take a lead role. No gospels were attributed to Mary Magdalene, Joanna or Susanna & the gospels in which Mary Magdalene was featured didn't make it into our Bible, although they were very popular at one time in early Christian history. You can still read them, but not in our Bibles.

I am sure Jesus never took their service for granted. Today, & especially in MCC, women play a strong role in leadership, and many have worked hard so that they can.

The women who followed Jesus were not groupies. They weren't crowding in to be near a rock star. These women were in X's debt. He had healed them. They were grateful. Now they wanted to help set others free. X had liberated them. And it's no accident that following them, there is another story of a woman who was being liberated.

You remember the story. A Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus to dinner. Imagine three low tables set to form a square & the 4th side open for serving. There were no chairs. Guests reclined on pillows on the floor. A woman, Luke says, who had lived a "sinful life" learned that Jesus was at the Pharisee's house. She is a "bad" woman. She has long ^{curly} hair. Good women wound up their hair & covered it.

we don't know who let her in, but she probably came in $\bar{c}$ the other townspeople who were given an opportunity to meet the celebrities who were having dinner $\bar{c}$ the important Pharisee. Even someone as questionable as this woman could have been able to have access to Jesus — and she does. She wept ²⁰profusely that she wet his feet $\bar{c}$ her tears and she lovingly knelt down and wiped his feet $\bar{c}$ her shameless hair. She kissed his feet + poured perfume on them from an alabaster vial hanging around her neck.

When Simon saw it, like a good Pharisee he was shocked, & said to himself "If this man was a prophet he would know what kind of woman is touching him."

Jesus knew what Simon was thinking and said, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, Teacher."

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender," Jesus said. "One owed him 500 denarii & the other 50. Neither had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled."

"You have judged correctly" Jesus said. Do you see this woman? I came into your house, you didn't give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet & her tears & wiped them & her hair, you didn't give me a kiss, but this woman from the time I entered has not stopped kissing my feet. You didn't put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

I don't know how you feel about it, but for some of us who have less than pretty pasts feel a deep sense of gratitude toward God & X. This woman had a terrible past. She was probably a prostitute - her hair says so - so she had many sins that needed forgiving. Simon thought of himself as righteous. Therefore he felt he had little that needed forgiving. By definition then, Simon could never love Jesus in the same way this poor woman did.

Women who had no man to take care

of them lived desperate lives. Prostitution was one of the ways they could survive. Maybe her life just got out of control.

But how did Simon become a self-righteous Pharisee, maybe he was born into it. Maybe he was covering a righteousness a heart that was greedy, envious, distrustful. Maybe he was prejudiced against people who were not as lucky as he was. Maybe he was being rewarded for being powerful while she was being punished for being poor. Simon was blind to his own need for healing and he would never have the joy that the woman attained.

One of the joys of being a preacher in a primarily gay church is knowing that most of us when we sing "Amazing Grace" understand this wretched place we've found ourselves in and aren't as likely to be self-righteous. We know we've been saved by grace & are grateful for it.

All of us need the faith that healed Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna & the poor woman in Simon's house that day. All of us need it — none of us deserve it. Grace is the free

gift of a loving God. God is the only one who can know our hearts + know what brings us to places good + evil, God wants to heal us + God wants to liberate us. Let's never think of ourselves as too bad to be loved and our lives as too awful to be healed. God loves us + Jesus heals even the worst of us - but also heals even the best of us. There ~~are~~^{is} no one beyond the loving care of a loving God + for that we are all grateful. Let us live our lives in gratitude. Amen.

of a family that had been
the children's own hearts to know
that being in the house was a
great, that was the best of all
best of all that in the house that
to make an old man to be happy
and one like a two people to be
happy, that was the best of all
even the most of us that was the
best of all that in the house
not know the house of an
house that for the house of all
great, that was the best of all
great, that was the best of all

They That Wait Isaiah 40: 1-31

If you have memorized any amount of scripture, one of our texts chosen by Liz & Tom-Ed, is probably in your repertoire: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up on wings like eagles; they shall run & not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

For 31 years, ever since I was ordained, ~~our~~ churches I've pastored have formed a circle, joined hands & repeated it as our benediction. It's a fitting benediction for anyone's life & certainly for someone we love, as we do Tom-Ed.

I guess the 40th chapter of Isaiah is one of the most supreme in all Biblical literature. Luther read it in the fortresses at Saulsberg, John Brown read it in the prison at Harper's Ferry. Webster said it was the basis of his eloquence and like many other great works of literature it began in the fires of war & oppression. Isaiah was not simply an exile, he was

a slave who had known the dungeon & the fetter. It begins with the words we hear in Handel's Messiah, "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, says your God," goes on to "Every valley shall be lifted up & the hill made low... and the glory of God shall be revealed," and Isaiah went on comforting the prisoners & exiles until the climax of the poem - "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength".

What Isaiah suggests is clear. No matter what the circumstances of life, no matter what happens to us, we have a source of strength in God that will enable us not just to plod wearily through life, but to soar like eagles - not just to survive, but to survive - style & meaning.

This year I was diagnosed - breast cancer, my partner was diagnosed - a tumor behind her eye, my daughter's best friend's father passed out & was diagnosed - the need for an aortic valve replacement, a dear friend's mother descended into

Alzheimer's and another dear friend
seroconverted from HIV to AIDS. And
still on Sunday morning we stand in
a circle and tell each other that
"Those who wait upon ~~the~~ Lord shall
renew their strength, they shall mount
upon wings like eagles; they shall run
& not be weary; they shall walk & not
tire."

Life is a series of crises. ~~Crisis~~ ^{we may} ^{not} ^{believe}
~~changes us~~. Crisis always brings ^{it today}
change and crisis changes us. ^{death}
isn't always the worst thing that
can happen to us. Sometimes when
someone we love has been seriously
ill, debilitated, hampered & in great
pain, death can be the greatest of
blessings. Tom-Ed couldn't
communicate in the way he loved,
music and language were shut out
by his brain tumor. Life was a
constant frustration; but now he's
healed — not as we think of healing,
but as God heals. As I spoke to Liz
when I was told of Tom-Ed's passing —
"Being God isn't such a bad thing,
is it?"

But the crisis of dealing w a loved one's death changes us. Crisis always changes us.

Isaiah also reminds me. We hate to wait. Restaurants know that we don't want to wait even one minute before the waiter takes our drink order & we're ready to walk out if we have to wait 5 minutes for them to take our dinner order. We don't like the idea of having to wait on the Lord, either. Whatever it is that God is going to do, God better get about the business of doing it. But ~~worry turns into concern~~ when we wait on the Lord. I love bumper stickers. Whether we like them or not, they get our attention. One of my favorites says, "worry is like a rocking chair... it's something to do but it won't get you anywhere."

When we face crises we tend to worry about them. The important thing is to worry about the things that really matter. Worry about whether your friend really has enough to eat and whether

their kids have a good school. Worry creatively about the world & it's condition & do something to change things. Worry about us believing that economic success is the secret to happiness — when it really is doing what you love best & learning to live on what that brings you.

Tom-Ed knew that. You don't get rich ^{as a college or university professor} as a church musician, but oh you do get to make some glorious music, and how happy you are & how glad you are to go to work.

Worry ceases to be a weight when we wait on the Lord.

The next line of ~~the~~ Isaiah's that has meaning is "They shall run & not be weary." What does that mean? It means that we shall spend our lives exhausting ourselves in what we love and not be completely spent. Isaiah didn't say "They shall lie down & do nothing & in that way renew their strength." Sometimes when we face death, we want to withdraw, and go away ~~and~~ hide.

No, Isaiah told us that we should grasp life by the wings & "mount up like eagles! They shall run & not be weary, they shall walk & not faint." ~~Crises~~ often helps us to find ourselves. Sometimes death of a loved one, helps us find strengths we didn't know we had and we find wings we didn't believe were part of us. And so Isaiah reminds us that we can really repeel ourselves and really give ourselves & not be weary, "if we do it in love for what we do & for those whom we love."

Finally,

Isaiah reminds us that no matter what the circumstances of our lives, no matter what we are facing, no matter what happens to us, we have a source of strength in God that will enable us not just to plod wearily thru life but to soar. Not just to survive but to survive in style & meaning.

So from comforting us at the beginning of the chapter, Isaiah ends it this way: "The Lord is the everlasting God ... He does not faint or grow weary. His understanding

is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint & strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint & be weary, & the young will fall exhausted, but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up & wings like eagles; they shall run & not be weary, they shall walk & not faint.

Liz, family - death is not extinguishing the light for the Christian; it is putting out the lamp because dawn has come. Tom-Ed is in God and that's not so terrible.

Soar - God is with you, also.

Amen -

[illegible]

4th After Pentecost
6/20/10

You Are Somebody

There is a time-honored story which comes from the FR. Revolution. Louis ^{XVI} ~~XVI~~ and the queen were condemned to death. They were escorted to the guillotine in a public square in Paris where they were beheaded. The mob was not satisfied. "Bring out the Prince," they cried, "He is next." The Prince was a terrified 6 yo, but he was next in line to be King of France. According to the crowd, he had to be eliminated.

Suddenly a shout came from the crowd. "Don't kill him. Killing is too good for him. It will only send him to heaven, and that's too good for royalty. Turn him over to Meg the ^{black} witch. She'll teach him to be a sinner, and when he dies his soul will go to hell.

That is what royalty deserves."

So according to the legend, that's exactly what happened. The crowd turned the prince over to Meg. She tried to teach him foul language, but every time she prompted the Prince to be profane, he would stubbornly stamp his feet + clench his fists and shout, "I will not say it. I will not speak that way. I was born a king + I will not speak like I live in a gutter."

I don't know if the story is really true, but it speaks to what Paul writes in today's epistle, "You are all children of God through faith in JC, for all of you ^{who} were baptized into X have clothed yourself in X. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to X, then you are Abraham's seed, & heirs according to promise."

Do you know who you are? You are a child of God. Nothing else matters in this world. Are you male? Irrelevant. Female? It doesn't matter. Are you from one of the better families in town? Good for you — that gives you many advantages in our society, but it means nothing when you stand before God. Are you white? That also comes with some advantages. Mostly it eliminates excuses for not doing well. Will it get you inside the gates of heaven? Not at all. JC has accepted you as part of his family. That's all that matters. Because of God's grace, you & I are children of God.

I did two years of a Master of Divinity at Boston University. For years, Howard Thurman

was dean of the chapel there. He was also the first African-American professor there. He inspired Martin Luther King when he was a doctoral student at BU. Thurman attributed much of his own sense of dignity & vocation to his grandmother, a former slave. His grandmother repeated to Howard a message she had heard at worship. Over & over, she told him & Martin would repeat it to his followers, "You are somebody."

You are somebody! It's terrible when a person believes that his or her life doesn't count. Yesterday I buried a friend in Florence, a gay man who was troubled most of his life. He was a married man & children and grand children, but he had always been afraid to come out. He was an accomplished organist & professor of organ, his wife knew about his other life, but he was afraid that all his accomplishments 'wouldn't' matter if people knew he was gay. And he died in the closet with people never knowing who he really was.

His wife, tho', wanted those of us who were close to him & knew to take part in his memorial. I was asked to speak and his wife asked me to use as my text "Those that wait upon our God,"

Our community sees it all the time. The teenager who feels he doesn't fit in. The adult loner who keeps sabotaging his or her relationships - mostly because they feel they don't deserve to be loved. The old person who wonders if it wouldn't be better for everyone if he went ahead and died. There are so many people in our community who think their lives don't matter in the great order of things. It's so sad & it's tragic because most of us have been there.

Gay or straight, bisexual or transgendered we all need to be loved; we need to be cared for, we need to know that what happens to us makes a difference to someone else.

Somewhere, someone like Tom-Ed exists who believes he or she is worthless

and lovable because of who they are - even tho' in his case his parents loved him, his wife adored him, his kids looked up to him + his students admired him. Somehow, people have the erroneous idea that has convinced them that they are unworthy, unloved, + unfit to dwell in society - all because they are not heterosexual. I don't let the world do that to you. As Troy Perry says, "It's a lie of the devil."

There was an interesting news story sometime back describing an incident that took place in Trieste in northeastern Italy. A rich man was driving his luxury car into a parking lot. As he did so, a parking lot attendant motioned to the spot where the man was supposed to park. The rich man ignored the attendant and pulled into another space instead. Soon the two got into an argument, with the attendant trying to explain to the rich man that he was not allowed to park where he did.

Eventually, the wealthy man ended the conversation by sneering at the parking lot attendant & saying, "You are nobody."

The attendant did not take the insult lying down. He took the rich man to court, where a judge ruled that telling someone they are nobody is not only impolite, ~~it~~ under Italian law it is illegal. The judge found the rich man guilty of slander, fining him 300 euros, plus 500 euros in court costs.

While it's true that many times people are too quick to sue over trivial matters, what a great service it would be for humanity if every person who made someone else feel small, insignificant, unworthy could be held accountable for their words or actions.

When I was a teenager, I was sent by a wonderful judge in NYC to a Jewish school. Because I lived there, people in the town assumed I was Jewish. I was sent off campus to the local high school where the kids called me Mike & Yid and gave me a hard time because I was also gay. High school

was a miserable place for me as it is for any kid who doesn't fit in. It took me years to get over the emotional beating I took at that high school. Gay, Jewish, African American, Hispanic, Moslem kids are all taking a ~~too~~ beating in some school somewhere in the US, & we have to remember how we feel when it was us & work to protect everyone's kids.

Henri Nouwen says "the world tells you many lies about who you are, and you have to be realistic enough to remind yourself of this. Every time you feel hurt, offended or rejected you have to dare to say to yourself, these feelings, strong as they are, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even tho' I can't feel it right now, is that I am a chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called & beloved from all eternity & held safe in an everlasting embrace." You are somebody.

Rose Marie Hart was a letter carrier in West Virginia for over 30 years. For the first 7 years, she said, her goal every day was to get the right letter in the right box + get it over as soon as possible + get on $\bar{c}$ her life. Then something happened. In her words, she met Jesus. She said, "from then on I looked at my route in a different way. I began to see the people along the route + listen to them. Oh, I knew some of them by name + I knew some of their stories. But now I heard domestic abuse in this house, joy because of the birth of a child in that house, celebration because of an upcoming wedding, + grief there because of a death. She stopped to talk to kids in to degree weather who were sitting in the cold because they'd forgotten their keys and told them about a house a couple of doors down where the people had said "If the kids ever need us, send them to us." She knew it was safe to tell them to go there + wait for their mom + dad to come home. Rose Marie began treating everyone along her mail route as tho' they were her brothers + sisters in X. Because she discovered

that she was somebody in X, she became committed to letting other people know that they were somebody, too.

That's what X-tian evangelism should mean. It's not about getting someone to come to your church or getting their names on the membership rolls. It's about letting the world know that because of who Jesus is + what he has done, we all matter. old + young, male + female, rich + poor, black + white, Anglo + Latino, gay + straight, bisexual + transgendered, we are all children of God.

Rev. Hal Charpening tells of a visit he made to a planetarium. What he discovered there is that you + I are made literally of stardust. Our wonderful human bodies are made of matter that was once a star. He goes on to say, "Perhaps on a scientific level that's not very exciting, but on a metaphoric ~~the~~ level, it's mind blowing. We have the Genesis story of Adam being created from earth,

and we have the scientific story of
humanity being created from the stars."

We've heard that we were made from the
dust of the earth, but have you ever
thought of it being stardust. You
are somebody. You are important.
Because X has come down from heaven,
you are now an heir of his, against
heir - X, a child of God.

Don't ever let anyone put you down
because of who you are. You are X's
and you are baptized. Therefore
you matter.

There was a song some years ago that
went like this: If anybody asks you
who you are - tell them you're a
child of God. Now if anyone asks
you - you remember to tell them
you're a child of God.
Amen

How to Handle Criticism? Keep Moving
 2 Kings 2:1-2, Galatians 5:1, 13-25
 Luke 9:51-62

How do you like it when people criticize you?

The first person who said "sticks + stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me" either lived as a hermit or was an out-and-out liar.

Names can hurt, words can hurt. Words can hurt a lot. Words can hurt a lot more & do a lot more long-term damage than any puny stick or stone.

Studies have shown how lasting an impression, how lifetime an impact, words can have on children. Kids who receive constant criticism about their looks, or their brains, or their abilities, grow up believing the words thrown at them. Some of us here this morning are spending our adulthood with the sound of "dummy", "fatso", "geek", "airhead", "loser", "faggot", echoing in our ears.

Words can stunt spirits, words can break hearts, we cut each other's throats
 with our words.

So what do we say to those who use words to hurt us? How should we handle our critics? How should we respond to criticism? When someone throws an arm around your shoulder, which is really a hand at your throat, what should we do? Should we take the criticism to heart? Weigh its content? Let it rattle our backs? Fire back a volley of our own in return?

For years I lived $\bar{c}$ the last option. An eye-for-an eye, a tooth-for-a tooth is the most tempting when criticism lashes out at you. Then I met Shirley & if I'd lived that way $\bar{c}$ her life would have been a constant hell. We'd have spent our lives lashing out at each other in a constant battle. We'd have broken up & missed some very good years. One of us had to learn to live differently & I couldn't change her. I had to change me. I'm the only one who could change me.

I ~~listen~~^{watch} MSNBC a lot at night. I love Keith Olbermann & Rachel Maddow. She's one of us. On the other side of things is Fox News and some people who don't like us. Actually, neither of them give

us much news. What they are is an acid-etched critique of each other. There may be real bullets + bombs being fired off in Iraq + Afghanistan, but back home there's an even more real war for political power. Shirley doesn't watch them because she gets so angry she can't sleep + she has to be up at 5. I wait until I record them + wait until she's asleep to watch them. I like to know who are friends are + what our enemies are saying about us. Some want to defend us — some just want to dish dirt.

Think about the Bible for a moment. There are some Bible stories we were tucked in to when we were kids. But there are many more that could give kids nightmares. There's a X-tian radio station that promises listeners that it is "safe for the whole family." Really? So the Bible is "safe"? Jesus is "safe"? Was that really his message "Come follow me + I will make you safe?" Do you really

Think all portions of the Bible are "safe for the family." One writer called certain passages in the Bible Texts of Terror. Sodom & Gomorrah was one of them.

Consider 2 Kings 2:23-25, recalling an event in the life of Elisha: "He went up from there to Bethel, and while he was going on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, 'Go away, baldie! Go away, baldie.' When he turned around & saw them he cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two she-bears came out of the woods & ^{mauled} ~~mauled~~ 42 of the boys. From there he went on to Mount Carmel & then returned to Samaria."

He did what to his critics!!! You mock someone for being bald & you get eaten by bears. That'll keep your kids up at night.

Well, it was a little more complex than that. First, Elisha was at Bethel, which by then was a center of false worship. Elisha was in enemy territory. The taunt of these boys didn't mean just "go away" - the Hebrew reads "go up".

They were mocking Elisha's role as the successor to Elijah who, as we read today, was miraculously called up by God. They were "dissing" God's prophet, "dissing" God, and "dissing" the message God had sent to the people. That's what prompted him to call down "Curses in the Name of the Lord." Elisha didn't call down the bears, that's just a Hebrew story teller's added bonus.

Having stories like Elisha + the boy-eating bears in their history, it's easy to see where James + John might have gotten the idea that "commanding fire to come down from heaven" to "consume the inhospitable Samaritans" was an appropriate response. But Jesus' ministry + message isn't a repeat of Elijah or Elisha's prophetic roles. Jesus brings something new into the world. Jesus is more than a prophet. Jesus is Messiah. Jesus is ushering in a new order. Jesus is ushering in the D of G.

James + John mistakenly believe Jesus' presence is a call to judgment, and how often have we seen Christians who believe that. Jesus rebukes his own followers for their judgmental attitude. The Day 6 Jesus is gradually revealing, as he journeys toward Jerusalem. Won't he be brought about by power + might.

Those who criticized Jesus, who hesitated to follow him because they had other pressing duties, other responsibilities + other relationships missed his message. The dominion Jesus preached wasn't rooted in worldly ways. Jesus' way was a new way and could only be found by following the One who was the Way, the Truth + the Light.

When rejected by the Samaritans, Jesus refuses to dole out punishment. He simply moves on.

The late John Claypool pastored a Presbyterian church here in B'ham. He tells a story about a thunderstorm that swept through southern Kentucky at the farm where his forebears had lived for six generations. In the orchard the wind blew over an old pear tree that

had been there for as long as anyone could remember. Claypool's grandfather was saddened to lose the tree on which he had climbed as a boy & whose fruit he had eaten all his life.

A neighbor came by & said, "Doc, I'm really sorry to see your pear tree blown down." "I'm sorry, too" said his grandfather. "It was a real part of my past." "What are you going to do?" The neighbor asked. His grandfather paused for a moment & then said, "I'm going to pick the fruit & burn the rest."

"That's the wise way to deal w many things in our past. We need to learn their lessons, enjoy their pleasures, & then go on in the present & into the future," said Dr. Claypool.

Jesus said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow & looks back is fit for the Kingdom."

Jesus simply moves on. He keeps moving. He has a date & destiny. He continues on his way to the

fulfillment of God's promise. As he drew closer to his destination, Jesus' critics increased in number & turned even more caustic. The temple priests & the Sadducees didn't agree much with the Pharisees - but they agreed together to criticize Jesus. The Roman rulers & the Jewish authorities didn't agree on much - but they agreed to criticize Jesus.

Once upon a time there was a mule that fell into a dead well that was about 20 feet deep. Well, the farmer saw from a distance what happened to his mule, but it was just at dusk & by the time he got to the well it was dark & he had no flashlight. But the farmer listened hard for a moment, called out to his mule & got no response, so he presumed the animal was dead. So what do you do with a dead mule in a dead well? You bury it. There was a pile of dirt nearby, so the farmer started throwing dirt in the well.

Now the mule had landed on all fours & while it was initially shaken up & a little out of it, the mule eventually came around & was alright. But it couldn't move.

It began stomping its four feet where it was to keep awake + by morning do you know what happened? The farmer thought he had filled the well w/ dirt almost to the top. But in the morning, looke, there appeared the old stomping mule at the top of the well on well stomped + solid ground.

Keep moving, keep stomping + kicking down the dirt + you'll end up on top.

In 2006, a movie came out called "Amazing Grace." It was the story of Wm. Wilberforce, who is credited w/ being primarily responsible for the 2/23/1807 vote in England to abolish the slave trade. The vote was 283:16.

The vote doesn't tell the story. Wilberforce spent 20 years pushing abolition. Few people in history were as stubborn as Wilberforce, and few people were as criticized as Wilberforce. In the 1790's he was slandered in the press, physically assaulted, subjected to numerous death threats, once

challenged to a duel. At times he had to travel w/ a body guard. His spirit was almost broken many times. He suffered a nervous breakdown.

But in spite of all the dirt thrown at Wilkesforce, he kept stomping + moving. He handled criticism, not by turning back + engaging his critics, but by kicking down the dirt + moving on toward his goal. He set his face toward the abolition of slavery + he didn't look back.

To follow on that story, there's a story about Belmont Abbey College in N.C. The monks who started the college were wandering along a road and came to a crossroad. There was an interesting huge granite flat rock + they were intrigued by it.

As they talked to neighbors about it, they were told the rock was a major selling place for slaves in that sad time in our history. Men, women + children would stand on that rock + be sold. So the monks decided to move it to their new monastery. They dug out a well in its center + made it their baptismal font. On it reads a plaque. "Upon this rock, people

were once sold into slavery. Now,
upon this rock, thru the waters of
baptism, people become the free
children of God.

When people call us names it is a
sign of their own insignificance.
How do we handle it? Love God &
keep on moving. Transforn life
wherever you are, follow & where you
are, whatever you are).

Names hurt, but some bless us,
like "Child of God." You are a
child of God - ^{earn to} live like it.
Amen,

There were two other things I noticed
when I looked at the picture of
the person, he had a very
kind of look.

When I first saw the picture it was
a picture of a man who was very
kind of a man. I had never seen
him before. I had never seen
him before. I had never seen
him before.

There was just a few more things I
noticed. I noticed that the man
was very kind of a man. I had
never seen him before.

There was just a few more things I
noticed. I noticed that the man
was very kind of a man. I had
never seen him before.

6th after Pentecost
7/4/10

Something to Pray About
2 Kings 5: 1-14, Galatians 6: 1-16
Luke 10: 1-20

Today is Independence Day. Our country is 234 years old. Someone once said that the average age of a democracy is 200 years. We've passed that but just barely. America is just a baby compared to some nations. Think about it. When Jesus was alive China was already a very old nation. Rome + Greece existed long before Christ was born. Want to get an idea of how young we are? When Thos. Jefferson died, Abraham Lincoln was about 17; when Lincoln was assassinated, Woodrow Wilson was a boy of 8. When Wilson died Ronald Reagan was 12. When John F. Kennedy was president, Bill Clinton was a teenager. 5 people get us back to when America was born. Today we celebrate the birth of our democracy. I think it was Johnny Carson who described democracy like this: (Unlike communism,

democracy doesn't mean having ^{just} one ineffective political party; it means having two ineffective political parties. — Democracy is welcoming people from other lands & giving them something to hold onto, usually a map or a leaf blower. And democracy means that with proper timing & scrupulous bookkeeping, anyone can die owing the government a huge amount of money.

We laugh to keep from crying, and we give thanks for the blessings we do receive as citizens of a democracy. It's not perfect yet & in some ways we are still second class citizens of it, but it's a whole lot better than many countries like some ~~in~~ Uganda for example, where they are trying to pass a law making homosexuality punishable by death. We brag about the progress we have made when some of our states allow gay marriage & others allow civil unions, of course that will probably never happen in Alabama, but America does have some things to brag about.

We brag about our football teams, about the quality of our colleges, we even have the 2nd best HS in America here in Birmingham + most of us don't know it - it's The International Baccalaureate School which is part of Ramsey HS.

Paul was different. Paul said there was only one thing worth boasting about. It was the cross of JC.

I've talked about this before. Many churches have stopped using the cross on their altars. Some of the newer churches won't put a cross on their buildings. It's becoming old fashioned to preach about the cross and places are not calling themselves churches any more, but worship centers or some other title. It's like we're ashamed to be Christians. But Paul boasted about it.

To begin with, Paul had many things he could have boasted about. He was a Roman citizen. We like to think it's

grand to be an American citizen, but imagine what it means to be a citizen of Rome when Rome ruled most of the known world. Being a Roman citizen meant you had special rights + privileges wherever you were in the Empire. Roman citizens could not be imprisoned $\bar{a}$ a trial, nor could they be scourged $\bar{a}$ a cat-of-9-tails or crucified. ~~But~~ we are told Simon Peter was crucified upside down. Paul - on the other hand - could not be crucified because he was a Roman citizen.

He could have boasted about his religious upbringing. Nobody had a richer background in the Jewish faith than Paul. In Philippians he notes that he was "circumcised on the 8th day, of the people of Israel; of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee; as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as ~~to~~ to righteousness, under the law blameless." But then Paul adds, "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of X. Indeed I counted everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing X Jesus as my Lord."

Paul could have boasted about his education -

After all, Paul studied the Jewish Law in Jerusalem under a Rabbi who is still considered one of the 3 greatest, Gamaliel. For a serious student that's like boasting you went to Harvard or Yale. It was probably tough but it paid off. In his writings Paul shows not only a thorough understanding of the wisdom of his own people, but also the thinking of the philosophical Gks. Can you think of any passage of the Bible that reads like 1 Cor. 13? "If I speak in the tongues of men + of angels, but have not love, I am only a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy + can fathom all mysteries + all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing..."

Paul was a person of extraordinary credentials + talent. He could have boasted about many things - but he simply wrote: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord JC."

That's an extraordinary statement considering that the cross was an incredibly offensive symbol. We've talked about it before, but think about it. A cross was a symbol of shame in those days. Criminals died on crosses not decent folk. You wouldn't take an electric chair & place it on the altar? Or a gallows? A hypodermic needle in honor of lethal injections. No wonder Paul writes "The cross is foolishness to both the Jews & the Greeks."

The Romans considered death on a cross far too cruel for their own citizens. Sophisticated Romans considered crucifixion barbaric. It was the extreme form of punishment imposed by Roman law for the execution of slaves, criminals & revolutionaries. That Jesus had been crucified like a common criminal would not have been impressive to the proper people of the Roman world.

For the Jews, the cross was an object of shame. First, the Romans had executed thousands of their people by crucifixion ~~as Rome~~ during the conquest of their land.

It was a symbol of repression like the
ovens at Buchenwald is today.

Nothing was good about Rome, especially
not the cross.

Secondly, Jews connected crucifixion
to a passage in Deuteronomy that says:
"If a man guilty of a capital offense
is put to death & his body is hung on a
tree, you must not leave his body on
the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him
that same day, because anyone who is
hung on a tree is under God's curse."

For the ancient world, it would have
been hard for them to think of the cross
as a symbol of the Messiah. But it was.
We are in danger of almost reviling
the cross the way they Jews & the Romans
of X's day did. We hang it around
our necks but don't think about
what it really means. It's bling &
sometimes not much more.

If we really think about it, The cross
really says to us how much God loves
us. I don't know where you've spent

your life, but I've spent some of mine in some pretty desperate situations. I've learned that the cross is a sign to me of God's love. When Paul looked at the cross, he saw it as a symbol of God's love poured out.

A woman named Kim Drake wrote to Reader's Digest sometime back to say that her mom was getting swamped - calls from strangers. It seems a billing service had launched an 800 number that was the same as hers. When she called to complain they told her to get a new number. "I've had mine for 20 years," she pleaded. "Couldn't you change yours?" They refused. So Kim's mom told the billing service, "Fine. From now on I'm going to tell everyone who calls that their bill is paid in full." The billing company got a new number the next day.

"Telelestai" - what Jesus said from the cross, means "paid in full." When Paul saw the cross, he understood that he never could satisfy the demands of religious law. None of us can. We can never be good enough.

Paul understood that X interceded for him + that the cross was a sign of God's grace. Paul understood that by the cross he had been forgiven + his life was changed. In one sense Paul had been a 1st C Terrorist. He had been part of the mob that stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Paul had been willing to put people to death simply, because they didn't believe what he did. He was horrified at what he had been, at the same time, he knew that person no longer existed. He was different + both he + God knew it. He had been transformed inwardly, + for Paul that was made possible only by the cross.

There is the story of a Christian missionary in S.A. named Donna. Donna ~~wasn't~~ ^{didn't} have a history of being good + proper. She'd had a rough life + didn't feel too good about it.

One day she watched weavers working to produce a new rug. The first thing the weavers did was shear the sheep. Then + detergent they washed the wool

and sorted the wool into two piles. The first was a pile of pure white wool. In the second pile was the flawed, stained wool. The weavers took the stained wool + dyed it many colors. Then with great skill they began weaving the flawed wool. Weaving, 60,000 knots every square foot, they took that newly dyed wool + produced magnificent wool rugs.

All of a sudden, Donna saw herself, scarred, stained, flawed, never living up to her own expectations + realized that that was what God could do to her. God could take all her flaws, all her imperfections and make the dye that would turn her life into something beautiful.

Paul looked at the cross + saw X dying for the sins of the world, but also saw his own forgiveness. He had become a new person in X. His flawed, scarred life had been transformed.

And so it is to all of us. We never want to forget that through our faith we have the possibility of a changed life. No matter who we've been in the past, thru X we are made new, whole + fresh.

What do we call tow trucks here in the U.S. "wreckers". In England, tow trucks have a word on each side of the truck that says "Recovery." The same vehicle, the same function, but a totally different perspective. We say "there goes a wrecker." They say "Here comes Recovery."

For me, I cannot give up the cross. For me it's all about Recovery. Paul knew that because he was one whose life had been recovered and radically changed. Paul boasted about only one thing. It was the cross. It may have been an offensive symbol to the world, but to Paul it was everything. He knew that ⁱⁿ the cross he would have been lost. I don't know what the cross means for you. For me it means a changed life. It's not just a decoration, but a sign to me of God's love. God loved me where I was, but God loved me too much to leave me there. God loves you, too, too much to leave you where you were. Allow yourself to be loved. Amen

[illegible]

7th After Pentecost
7/11/10

Three Basic Attitudes About Life
Ama 7: 1-17, Colossians 1: 1-14
Luke 10: 25-37

A Sunday School teacher was telling her class the story of the Good Samaritan. She told how the man was beaten, robbed, and left for dead. She described the situation in vivid detail so her students would catch the drama. Then she asked the class "If you saw a person lying on the roadside all wounded and bleeding, what would you do?" A thoughtful little girl broke the hushed silence. "I think I'd throw up."

So the story goes: On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the law?" Jesus replied. "How do you read it?" The expert answered. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart & with all your soul & with all your strength, and Love your neighbor as yourself." "You have answered correctly, do this and live," said Jesus.

"But," says Luke, this expert in the law wanted to justify himself & so he asked Jesus "And who is my neighbor?" And so Jesus tells him a story, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him & went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, & when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So, too, a Levite, when he came to the place & saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan... came to where the man was; and when he saw him had pity on him. He bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil & wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to the inn, & took care of him. The next day he took two silver coins & gave them to the innkeeper, "Look after him," he said, "and when I return I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have." "Which of these," asked Jesus, "do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go & do likewise."

There are some basic attitudes about life in this parable of the Good Samaritan - maybe three basic attitudes that are present in every human situation.

First, we have the lawyer who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. His attitude was basically "What's in it for me?" His question tells it all. He's not asking about what he can do to make this a better world or what he can do to be a better person. All he wants to know is how he can get into heaven.

Luke says he asks in order to test Jesus. I think there was more.

So many churches today preach sermon after sermon about what people need to do to be "saved." Even at funerals, there are preachers who use death of a loved one into scaring you into heaven. The lawyer suspects that Jesus

has some special insight into how to evade the finality of death & asks, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

I guess it's natural for us to want to go to heaven. We've been told so since we were kids. No healthy person wants to die. But if this is all there is to faith, then we're a long way from the abundant life Christ desires for each of us.

But it scares me when this is the main reason people become Christians. I want to go to heaven. What's in it for me? The trouble with it is that it's only the beginning of our obsession with our own needs. When we get sick, we want to know there is that great Someone in the sky we can turn to. We worry about our loved ones: if being a person of faith means God will take care of them, then okay, I'll be religious. We don't say it that crassly but maybe 90% of us come to our faith asking, "What's in it for me?"

Notice that the young lawyer quotes the

morning prayer, the Shema, by saying that the law says "you shall love the Lord your God $\bar{e}$ your whole heart, soul, strength + mind" + you must "love your neighbor as yourself."

I love the phrase "seeking to justify himself." The lawyer knew full well what the Jewish law required of him — love God, love your neighbor.

Apparently he also knew that he hadn't lived up to that law, so he did what we all try to do, "He seeks to justify himself." It happens all the time. A homeless

person asks us for change. What do we do? We give it + then we feel guilty. "He'll probably spend it on alcohol or drugs," we say to ourselves.

Or like this week, Roberto's dog died. We know we need to say something, offer our condolences or our encouragement, we get embarrassed. And then we justify ourselves, "Someone closer than me will take care of it." We don't do the kind or loving thing because there's nothing in it for us,

The lawyer is a nice guy. He'll do all right in life, but he'll never be what God wants him to be. He'll never escape his essential attitude of "what's in it for me?" We're all a little like that. Sometimes we do the right thing for the wrong reason. It's possible we do good works with the overall intention of padding our spiritual resume. Enlightened self interest. There's nothing wrong with it, it's just not where God wants us to be.

Second attitude is "It's not my problem". Some of you may have heard or read about the famous "Good Samaritan" research that was done at Princeton Univ back in the 70's. A professor who was a stickler for punctuality at his lectures assigned his students sermons on the Good Samaritan. They were told that they would preach 10 minute sermons across campus at the periphery chapel. They were told that there would be people waiting to hear them & they were not to be late.

Along the route these seminarians traveled across campus, the researchers had hired

an actor to play the role of a victim who was lying on the ground clutching his chest & coughing. This is the amazing result. 90% of the seminarians who were to preach on the Good Sam.

Ignored the needs of a suffering person right in front of them in their haste to get across campus. Some of them literally stepped over the victim as they hurried on their way.

These seminarians weren't bad people. Like most of us, they were simply self-involved. They had their own agendas & a man having a heart attack wasn't on their agenda. They were concerned w/ doing good in the abstract but not doing good in the concrete.

Certainly the priest & the Levite in the story were religious men. And they were very conscientious about their service to God. If the man had been dead & if they had touched him, they would have been ritually unclean for 7 days. They couldn't have carried out their duties. They performed their

professional duties but they didn't apply their spiritual knowledge to the real world's needs. It's possible to love God & not like people. I think there are too many people who are religious but not kind. Of course, clergy are not the only people guilty of looking at a bad situation & saying "It's not my problem."

Finally, there's the Samaritan. His attitude was "What can I do to help?"

Of course the Samaritans & the Jews had problems w/ each other. The man who needed help was probably a Jew & Jews were taught to despise Samaritans & Samaritans were taught to despise Jews. It may be that the Samaritan never thought about who the man was. The LGBT community is a very broad place. A lot of lesbians won't associate w/ any male over 12. A lot of gay men resent the presence of women at any of their social occasions. The thought of associating w/ bisexual folk - male or female - can

be intimidating. What if a bi-
male comes on to me or my
partner or a bi female makes a
pass at a gay man. Scary. And
we don't have much experience
with the transgender community.
And then we come to church - and
any of us could be any of those
people & we know that we are all
children of God and our response
can't be "What's in it for me?" or
"It's not my problem", but has to be
"What can I do to help?"

Once when one of our new women
pastors was visiting the hospital
& standing by the receptionists counter
a group of about 10 burly men
came in together. They were dressed
in black leather jackets, had long
hair & they were dripping chains
of one size & another. The pastor's
first reaction was that of the priest's.
She wanted to get out of there as
quickly as possible. For some
reason she felt threatened. How the
elderly woman at the receptionist's
desk

must have felt can only be imagined,
both of them seriously outnumbered.
But then the pastor noticed that one
of the men had a bouquet of flowers
in his hand. They had come to the
hospital for the same reason she had -
to visit a sick friend. But because
they looked different, she wanted to pass
by on the other side. But first she
had come there to see what she could
do to help.

Three attitudes. Where do any of us stand?
What dominates our lives? What's in it
for me? Not my problem. What can I
do to help?

How difficult it is to stop & try to help
without thinking what's in it for me?
How difficult it is to be sensitive. We
want to say - That's not my neighbor.
He/she's from a different part of the
country (I hear that a lot - she's a northerner)
He's a Republican. She makes a lot of money.
He's black or ^{she's} Hispanic. They're not my
neighbor. But, you know, $\bar{c}$ Jesus

it doesn't make any difference who he or she is. He's leather, she's lipstick doesn't matter to Jesus.

If we are people within whom the love of God dwells we won't ask what's in it for me, or say it's not my problem. We will respond & compassion to those whom we pass on the roadside of life. The young lawyer asked: how can I love my neighbor if I don't know who he is? And Jesus replied "It's not who he is. It's who you are."

Amen.

8th after Pentecost
7/18/10

Sisters

Amos 8: 1-12, Colossians 1: 15-28

Luke 10: 38-42

When I was young, Irving Berlin was a famous writer of popular songs. He had one song called "Sisters" and tells about how two sisters are devoted to each other. But its famous refrain goes like this: "Lord keep the mister who comes between me + my sister and Lord keep the sister who comes between me + my man."

Why Jesus got involved in a spat between two sisters, I wouldn't attempt to understand. Shirley grew up with 4 sisters. I wouldn't dream of getting between any two of them - especially Shirley + her youngest sister Jane. That would be a minefield I wouldn't want to enter. Even Jesus should have known better. Psychologists tell us that sisters have more intense relationships ~~each other~~ each other, positive + negative than brothers do or brothers + sisters do.

Jesus + his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem. It was his last journey there. He knew he was going to die there. First, they stop to see Jesus' best friends - Mary, Martha + Lazarus - Jesus' family of choice. They live in Bethany. Luke tells me it was Martha's house. No one mentions Mary, Martha or Lazarus having a spouse. They are all unmarried.

By almost any ancient tradition, it should have been Lazarus' house as the male head of family. The only way it would be Martha's house would be if she was a widow. It would also explain how Martha is thought of as the older sister + Mary + Lazarus as younger. Martha was the head of the household. She is Jesus' host. Hospitality is important in the Bible. We have talked about hospitality + its importance when we look at Sodom + Gomorrah. The chapter before talks about hospitality given + the Sodom story talks about hospitality abused. Mary is doing her best to be hospitable

to someone important to her + her family. Martha's name means "Lady" or "mistress of the house," and she took entertaining her famous guest seriously. Mary, Martha + Lazarus were Jesus' closest friends + he often stayed at their house, since it was within a sabbath's walk of Jerusalem.

But stop + think for a moment. If Jesus was on his last trip to Jerusalem, he was traveling w/ his disciples. Martha wasn't just feeding Jesus + the family. She was feeding 16 people at least. 12 disciples, Jesus + the family. Soup for 16 is a big deal and if she prepared fish + salad, olives + cheese that would be a tremendous chore, but wait maybe a goat or a lamb would be in order for an honored guest. Now we're getting into a ^{very} big deal. Men in that time did not help in the kitchen - all the work fell on Martha as the ~~lady~~^{mistress} of the house - and her lazy little sister wasn't helping.

Miriam ~~was~~ would have been Mary's name in Hebrew. Remember Moses' sister Miriam? She had a reputation for being rebellious. Maybe this Miriam was, too. Mary did something women didn't do in Jesus' day. In fact, it was pretty extraordinary. Luke tells us Mary was "sitting at the Lord's feet listening to what he said." And that doesn't seem especially significant to us, except maybe that she could have been helping her sister, but it could have been very significant.

In biblical times, to sit at a Rabbi's feet meant that you were receiving formal training with him as a disciple in the same way that Paul sat at the feet of the famed Rabbi Gamaliel when Paul was a young man. Invariably, at that time, listening to a rabbi teach was only for males. Think about the Barbra Streisand movie "Yentl" Even as late as the turn of the ~~19th~~ 1900's, good Jewish girls didn't study at rabbinical school. Mary was intruding herself as an equal into the men's world

instead of being a good girl + helping in the kitchen.

- One commentator notes, "That Jesus would encourage her to listen to him as he taught in the house was, in itself, radical. Women were openly despised by the Judaism of the time. Women were exempt from the study of the Torah. Most rabbis actively discouraged women from learning. The Mishnah, a commentary on the law, was compiled not long after NT times. It includes some pretty cynical thoughts about women. In one place it says, 'May the words of the Torah be ~~turned~~ turned, they should not be handed over to women.' Rabbi Eliezer, who lived about the time of Gamaliel, said, 'If a man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery.'

Each rabbi of the time said it was more profitable to teach your dog Scripture than your wife. We think the fundamentalist Muslims have a

dim view of women, but it wasn't much different from the orthodox view in Jesus' time. We have to remember that orthodox Jewish women even today are not permitted in Jewish seminaries in many places. So Mary's actions of going in + sitting at Jesus' feet were really quite astonishing.

This wasn't what upset Martha. She was upset that Mary had left her to do all the work — and it was a lot of work. Martha was resentful. She played passive aggressive. She didn't go to Mary directly. Instead she went to Jesus. "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me."

Remember the seder? After we fed every body who stayed to wash the pots? Steve! He could have been resentful that no one else did it — but instead he rolled up his sleeves + did what needed to be done + others seeing him began to pitch in + help put things away.

we need people like Stone & Martha. And I don't believe for a moment that Jesus didn't appreciate what Martha was doing for him & the disciples, but this was an important time in Jesus' ministry. He knew what Martha didn't. He knew his time was short. There wouldn't be many more opportunities for him to teach them what they needed to know. And so with love in his eyes & a tender smile, Jesus said to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are worried & upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better & it will not be taken away from her."

I almost think Jesus was saying to Martha, "Martha, you have many things on your mind, but right now I need you to focus on just one thing. There will be other times when Mary can help in the kitchen. Right now I need you both to hear what I have to say about the D of G."

Jesus wasn't putting Martha down

as the mistress of the house. If he had he + the disciples would have gone hungry. He was simply saying there's a time + place for everything, + right now he needed them to focus on his mission from God.

Tracy Perry used to say that we have to remember to "keep the first things first". The first thing was his coming death and Martha was preoccupied + resenting her sister not helping. There's nothing more destructive than resentment. It can ruin your life... and Jesus knew it. It concerned him to see this attitude in Martha. In GK there are two words for anger. There is "thumos" a kind of quick anger that flares up + just as quickly dies down. Then there's "orge" this is a kind of seething anger, a brooding anger that feeds ^{on} itself + is long-lived. It's the anger of a person who nurses his/her wrath to keep it warm. This is what resentment is made of.

Martha's resentment had not only cut her off from Mary - but it cut her off

from Jesus. Luke talks about resentment a number of times - it's what the Elder Brother in the Prodigal Son is all about. He resented his younger brother & it cut him off from his father - who, of course, stands for God. That's how resentment affects us & why it is so dangerous. It separates us from the people who are important in our lives & it separates us from God & X. In this episode, what Jesus is saying is beware of resentment - it can devastate your soul.

The second problem Martha has is narrowness. Martha thinks her way is the only way & she wants to force it on Mary. Martha thinks there's only one way to show Jesus hospitality - her way. She forgets that we're all different, that we're all ~~unique~~ individuals & we each have a unique relationship w/ X & God. We're all experienced other people's narrowness. Some people think their religious experience is the only valid one.

And they try to force their way on everybody. They don't understand that God is big enough to relate to each of us differently, individually, uniquely, personally.

Last, there's unkindness. When will we ever learn. Martha tried to make herself look good by making Mary look bad and it "boomeranged" on her + she came out the unattractive one.

Our condemning judgments come back to haunt us. When we are unkind to others we're the ones who end up looking bad.

I remember a rather routine article about relationships, except that it said one thing important, "If you ever are in a situation where you have to choose ~~between~~ ~~either yourself where you have to choose~~ between making yourself or your partner look good, always choose to make your partner look good." Jesus would have liked that. He probably would have said "always choose to make others look good."

~~It~~ I like this story. It makes a pretty clear point. If we bend out resentment

narrowness & unkindness, it comes back to haunt us; but if we send out grace & compassion they come back to bless us. Jesus is teaching about attitude & he is saying to us to beware of resentment, narrowness & unkindness. Choose instead the way of grace & compassion.

Jesus knows that there is a lot of work to be done to bring about the D of G. And sometimes we're going to get upset because not everybody gets it. In the middle of all the stories about being good Samaritans & the work being plenty but the harvesters are few, comes a story about stopping for a little while & just sitting at Jesus' feet. Yes, there's a lot to be done, but don't let's get resentful when others aren't doing their share. Let's just take some time to sit at Jesus' feet & listen while he prepares us for the D of G. There's never enough time for that and there's no time like now to begin.
Amen.

9th After Pentecost
7/25/10

The Prayer Life of Effective Christians
Hosea 1:2-10, Colossians 2:6-19
Luke 11:1-16

A mother was teaching her little girl the Lord's Prayer. For several evenings at bedtime the little girl would repeat lines from the prayer after her mom. Finally, the little girl decided to go solo. Mom listened in pride as the child carefully enunciated every word up to the end of the prayer: "Lead us not into temptation," she prayed, "but deliver us some E-mail."

Well, she almost got it right. Another child, a little boy, was also into computers. His S.S. class was discussing prayer. The kids all knew that the way to end a prayer was by saying, "Amen." "Does anyone know what 'amen' means?" There was a long silence. Finally one young fellow spoke up & said, "I think it means 'send'."

We're surprised at how kids put things. ^{CHARMED}
And we're charmed.

But sometimes we're surprised at how Jesus put things. And sometimes it is hard for us to understand what he means. Take, for example, today's section from Luke. Jesus begins with what we know as Christ's prayer or "the Lord's prayer."

Luke tells us that one day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Jesus, teach us to pray," just as John taught his disciples.

Jesus said to them, "When you pray, say, ~~Abba~~, hallowed be your name, your dominion come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation."

It seems like a shortened version of the prayer we all know & repeat each Sunday & sometimes in our own

prayers. We recognize the simplicity and the beauty of the words and what they have meant in our own spiritual development.

Then Jesus sets out to explain the elements of the prayer.

He says to them: "Suppose one of you has a friend, & he comes to you at midnight & says, 'Friend, lend me 3 loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.'"

Then the one inside says answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked & my children are with me in bed. I can't get up & give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up & give him the bread because he is a friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up & give him as much as he needs."

What does this mean? Does it mean that when we come to God in our needs, we are to pray over & over until God gives us what we want. That doesn't seem right. Does it mean we are to be bold in our asking, whatever that means,

A little boy was sitting next to a grizzled old holy man seated beside the Ganges River. "Will you teach me to pray?" the boy asked. "Are you sure you want to learn?" the holy man asked. "Yes, of course." With that, the holy man grabbed the boy's neck & plunged his head into the water. He held him there while the boy kicked & thrashed & tried to get away. Finally, after an interminable period of time the holy man let the boy out of the water. "What was that?!" asked the boy. "That was your first lesson in prayer. When you long for God the way you longed to breathe, then you will be able to pray."

God is not the great grocery clerk in the sky. God is the root of our being. In order to pray we have to want God more than we ever understand.

Jesus continues then, "So I say to you Ask & it will be given you, seek & you will find; knock & the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks the door will be opened."

Think about that for a moment.

Everyone who asks receives. Have you ever received everything you've ever prayed for? It sounds so simple, "ask & it will be given to you", that's not my experience. There are many things I have asked God for that I haven't received. Sometimes I'm glad I didn't. Sometimes I would like to sing to Harth Brooks, "Thank God for unanswered prayers." Ask, Seek, Knock - what does it mean?

First, prayer is essential to our lives as Christians. From foster home to orphanage, to a bad home ~~to~~ situation * to a state school * to 6 months living on the streets of NY - I don't know how I would have made it without prayer. Sometimes we pray out of a sense of deep need. Other times we will be ^{so} filled with joy that we will be driven to our knees in thanksgiving. And then there will be the times when we are filled with shame over some action or thought that we can only pray

"God have mercy on me."

Not only are we to pray, but we are to persist in our prayer life even when it seems God is not listening. ~~Jesus~~ Jesus talks about the man who comes knocking, badly, on the door at midnight asking a friend for a favor, & believe Jesus is saying, "God honors persistence in prayer."

~~The~~ The householder was concerned because he had no bread in the house to set before his journeying friend. It's a little like the nursery rhyme about Old Mother Hubbard who found her cupboard bare. It was the custom in that day to only make as much bread as was absolutely necessary for the day so that none would be wasted. But in the Biblical world, hospitality was a sacred duty. It was unacceptable to give a guest no food, regardless of how unexpected he was. But what to do? The market place was obviously closed, for it was now midnight. There simply was no bread in the house. But the householder has a trump card. He may not have bread - but he has a neighbor.

with 4 apartments on each floor.

I can remember when we used to borrow things from our neighbor. We lived in a 4y apartment house * ~~there was an~~ ~~with an~~ alley between us + our neighbor across the hall. We had clotheslines that went between the kitchen windows high above the alley. Our neighbor was Jewish, + she + my stepmother were kitchen window friends. They would borrow each other's clothesline when the wash was too big for just one. They would call across the alley + borrow an egg or send each other cookies. The nearest store was many blocks away, we didn't have cars. We had neighbors. Now we get in our car + drive to the convenience store. We wouldn't think of asking a neighbor.

Perhaps we are too proud to ask for help when we need it. Rather than being indebted to friends we're indebted to credit card companies — and we know how forgiving they are. The help we receive is becoming more + more impersonal.

Maybe we're afraid to ask God for help. We've experienced unanswered prayer so often we're afraid to ask.

I do know this: I know that the person who refuses to pray, for whatever reason, is missing out on life's most powerful resource. We need to want to spend some time $\bar{c}$ God each day. We need to tell God the deepest desires of our hearts. What have we got to lose? We are followers of X. Jesus prayed. Jesus taught us how. To be X'tian is to pray.

The second thing is to know that prayer works. When I left NY for N.O. I had a job waiting for me, a house I had known for years + was going back to, a home + a school for my very young children. The only thing I didn't have was money. I had used all I had in the move. The move was shortly before Palm Sunday and I went to church ~~that morning~~ ^{Palm Sunday} + prayed that we would make it until I got my first pay on my new job. Palm Sunday afternoon the nursery school where my boys went was having a fashion show.

The boys were dressed in their very Sunday best for the fashion show. The admission was \$1⁰⁰ and we were to bring a can of something for a door prize. That morning we had drunk the last of our coffee. We brought 4 cans from our meager supply & our last two dollars.

We sat & enjoyed 3+4 yo's parade in their Easter finery for the fashion show and before it was over we won the door prize & on top was a 1/2 pound of Cafe Bustelo - obviously brought by one of the Hispanic families. But it was coffee & we needed coffee. God answered our prayers even specifically to knowing that we needed coffee.

"Ask & it will be given you; seek & you will find, knock & it will be opened unto you." Jesus is not saying that every thing we ask for will be given to us; he is saying that every prayer is heard. Every prayer will be answered in some appropriate way. Every prayer is answered, but not always in the way we hope,

The important thing is to learn to trust God. Jesus' teachings are best understood by the conclusion to the passage; "which of you parents," says Jesus, "if your child asks for a fish will give a snake instead? Or if the child asks for an egg, will he give a scorpion? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly parent give the HS to those who ask?"

Jesus is saying to us, trust God. If we want only the best for our human children, how much more does God want only the best for God's children? God loves us. God is only interested in our best good, and even tho' we may not see God's hand at work answering our prayers, some day we will see that God was with us all the time. In the meantime, like the neighbor pounding on the friend's door after midnight, we need to keep praying + trusting.

Ever wonder about the acronym ASAP. Generally we think of it in terms of even more hurry and stress "as soon as possible."

But it has another meaning that may help us find a new way to deal in rough times alone, the way.

There's work to do, deadlines to meet, no time to spare. But as you hurry, ASAP.

Always say a prayer. In the midst of chaos, do your best & let God do the rest. ASAP - always say a prayer. It may seem your worries are more than you can bear - ASAP. God knows how stressful life is & wants to ease our cares - God will respond to all your needs - ASAP - always say a prayer.

Keep praying & keep trusting. Life can be cruel, but we have an ally - a friend who never forgets or forsakes us. Do not hesitate to pound on heaven's door. Do not lose hope, even if things do not turn out as you'd planned. God has not forgotten you. Some day you will see God's plan in all its fullness & you will understand God's plan was for your best good. If we know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more does God know how to give good gifts to His children.

That's the promise — and God always
keeps His promises. Amen.

10-11 ~~12-13~~ after Pentecost
8/1/10

Gomer - God's "get"

Hosea 1:1-2:1, Hosea 11:1-11

Colossians 3:1-11 Luke 12:13-21

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses + all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

That's a nursery rhyme we learned as children. Somewhere along the line we learned in history class that Mother Goose was a political satirist. If we look between the lines of the rhymes we find a hidden message poking fun at royalty or the court.

Was Humpty a far courier destroyed by political intrigue? Only historians know for sure, but there is another kind of truth in his story: Some things + some relationships are just so fragile that all can be lost in one wrong move. Knock over your mom's antique hurricane lamp and it's junk no matter how much glue you use to put the pieces back together. Broadcast - like last week - a false story about anyone in the political realm and a career can be destroyed ~~and~~ even if libel is proved.

Shirley Sherrod knows this week that
"Trust is something you cannot put back
together once it's broken."

Take relationships. Two people can
make a relationship, create a world
together, share their lives + their bodies
and all of it will crumble in an
instant by the weight of a lie.

I don't know how many gay relationships
end every year, but straight folks
aren't doing too well. Eight people per
thousand got married in 2009 + four
in every thousand were divorced.

About half of straight marriages end in
divorce. The major factor - broken
trust. We're humans. We lie. We lie to
ourselves + to our mates about a lot of
things - like addictions to drugs or alcohol,
the money we spend + where we spend it,
who we were talking to on the internet --
and like that wonderful country
song "you're cheatin' heart."

Most relationships are broken by a
combination of those factors. Once the lies are
told, the wounds are almost impossible
to heal even if the relationship survives. Like
~~your~~ ^{mom's} antique lamp - the cracks are always there.

That's why the story of Hosea seems so personal so many centuries later.

It is a parable lived out in real life not only by the prophet but by nearly four out of a thousand people in our neighborhood. Hosea claims it is God's story.

In the beginning, Hosea, presumably a young prophet, is ordered by God to "take for yourself a ^{promiscuous} wife and have children of whoredom." Homer is probably a prostitute in a fertility cult - Baalim. Hosea marries Homer. The children from this marriage are given symbolic names. The first son is named Jezreel, which means "God sows," as in sowing a field. The name points back to former times, to battlefields of the past, to political shenanigans + treacherous acts, to authority exercised thru violence, to rulers who put personal gain over the common good + led the people down wayward paths. God's memory is long + God's perspective is wide, + God's justice is deep. Jezreel is a reminder that there is a history of disobedience to be reckoned with.

The daughter's name is ho-Rukama, which means "Not pitied". It is a stark name. God will no longer have pity on these people. They have strayed too far, sinned too much and prostituted themselves in pursuit of all kinds of pleasures. Their unfaithfulness has caught up c them. They are not to be pitied because they brought their sorrows upon themselves.

The second son's name is ho-Ammi. It's name means "Not my people" or "no kin of mine." The reason for the name is clear. The relationship of Israel to God is a covenant relationship. It is based on a promise. God will be their God & they will be God's people. God has had enough of them; "You are not my people & I am not your God." The sins of the past & of the present are too much. Someone else can have them, I don't know why anyone would want them.

We say, well that's the O.T. God, an angry God. We want a God who won't get angry c us, a god who won't take offense. We want a God who doesn't set standards. The words of Hosea are 2500 years old.

It was another time, another place,
yet we look at what's happening
today when ~~there~~ there is political
treachery, lying, leaders - 40 years
experience fail, people get hurt. We
take advantage of other people all
the time. we break commitments,
are disordered to God, & prostitute
ourselves figuratively for our own
profit and worship financial gods
of our own making. Optimal,
convenience & immediate satisfaction
matter the most to us, so we
assume that's what matters most
to God. We often believe that God's
will is whatever, whenever brings
us the most pleasure. Getting,
gaining, having are what count.
Giving & loving, reaching out &
letting go are simply not in fashion.

It's why Hasea reads so well today.
Hasea used his own family struggles
as a way to speak to his people (and
us) about their idolatry. In the
tragic last days of the No. Kingdom

There were 6 kings in 25 years. With the impending threat of Assyria, political maneuvering & diplomatic gamesmanship became a way of life. First came one treaty & then another, tribute paid to one nation & another, taxation upon taxation. Courting one military alliance after another in the name of tranquility. These were turbulent times & even the religious leaders were caught up in the current, living as tho' God were not God & as if the covenant made at Sinai had no ~~claim~~^{claim} on their actions.

The ancient Gods of Israel's neighbors were also given personal characteristics. Jealousy, anger, fury in the face of betrayal are all there, but no God fights so passionately for the human community nor expects such fidelity from it and none expresses such heartache when things go awry. We don't think of Hank Williams as a hymn writer when he sings "Your Cheatin' Heart" but that's God's lament over Israel & it's God's lament over us when we, too, are disobedient.

Hosea loves Gomer. God loves Israel. God loves us. No soap opera or romance novel could write the drama better. But more surprising and intriguing than the human infidelity related by this story is God's response: God promises reunion and reconciliation.

Gomer leaves Hosea. She returns to a life of prostitution, but after three children she is no longer young & beautiful. She is too old to serve and she is sold as a slave. Hosea saves his money & buys her back. The prophet goes on to say, "In the place where it was said to them 'you are not my people', it shall be said to them 'children of the living God.'" Beyond the heartache & lament is the undying commitment even when the love is scorned & abused. Where does Hosea find such forgiveness, such stubborn commitment to love. Only from the heart of God.

The "cheating heart" story is far too familiar

in human drama, whether it is
Homer or Israel or us. To invest
one's heart in another is incredibly
risky and to betray that trust is to
bring disaster upon oneself. That
anyone would take such a risk is
testimony to love's strength & hope.
That the Creator of the universe would
do so for the sake of humanity is nearly
incomprehensible. That this God would
continue to pursue & woo us despite
our faithlessness is almost beyond belief. ^m
Those who believe "you can't put Humpty
together again" don't know God's
power or X's love.

Reconciliation is not easy. Ask
anyone whose life has been impacted
by an affair. Before the relationship
can be restored there is a lot of "hell
to pay" — a lot of screaming & a lot
of silence to be endured; a lot of
confession to be made & tears to be
shed; a lot of hard work before trust can
be reestablished. Israel paid a heavy
price for its flirtation w/ pagan gods &
betrayal of God's compassion. About 721 BC

Samaria was crushed by the Assyrian army & its people exiled. The northern kingdom came to an end.

Yet - yet - That's the more helpful word in the whole Bible. It simply means "it ain't over till it's over, & it ain't over yet." In spite of all that's been said & all that's been done, God says, "yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered, & in the place where it was said to them, "you are not my people," it shall be said to them "children of the living God."

The message in Hosea is you may become as wayward as Hosea's wife, yet I will still love you. I have every reason not to, but I will be your God & you will be my people, in spite of you, because I love you."

In the midst of Hosea reporting the bad news about us, there is a new splash reporting the good news about God.

It isn't over, yet! Because God's love never ends. So in the midst of our lives, like the unfaithful Homer we can still sing, "Great is thy faithfulness." As unfaithful as we may be - God is always faithful. God always loves. Like Hosea & his wife, God keeps bringing us back.

The Presbyterian Church has a statement of faith that goes like this: "We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba. In sovereign love God created the world good and makes ~~us~~ everyone equally, in God's image, male + female, of every race & people, to live as one community. But we rebel against God; we hide from our creator. Ignoring God's commandments we violate the image of God in others + ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbors + nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted in our care. We deserve God's condemnation. Yet, God acts in justice + mercy to redeem creation. In everlasting love, the God of Abraham + Sarah chose a covenant people to bless

all the families of the earth. Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Having us still, God makes as Heers $\bar{c}$ Christ of the Covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still."

We deserve God's condemnation, yet God is faithful still, that is the message of Hosea.

The book of Hosea makes interesting reading. Its teaching is simple. In spite of our unfaithfulness to all that is good & true, in spite of our unfaithfulness to ourselves and to one another, & even to God, God is always faithful to us.

The way we live has real & sometimes unhappy consequences. We know that. Yet, $\bar{c}$ believers in every time & place we can rejoice that nothing in ~~the~~ life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

11 qtr Pentecost
8/8/10

Don't Look Before You Leap

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Luke 12:32-40

Somewhere I read some amazing information about an antelope known as the African impala. They can jump to a height of over 10 feet. One leap can cover a distance of 30 feet. Yet these magnificent animals can be kept in an enclosure in any zoo $\bar{c}$ a 3 foot high wall. You see, impalas will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will fall.

That's a wise, conservative approach to life. Do not jump if you cannot see before you ~~to~~ leap. We have a proverb for it, don't we, "Look ~~before~~ you leap."

How different that approach to life is from the life of faith described in today's reading from Hebrews "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

How's that for a working definition of faith "Sure of what we hope for & certain of what we do not see,"

It's the opposite of "look ~~to~~ before you leap." Faith is jumping without being able to see where our feet will fall.

There's an old story about a little boy on the second floor of a burning building. "Jump!" his father calls out to him. The little boy cries out timidly, "But, daddy, I can't see you." And his father says, "Yes, but I can see you."

That's the kind of faith the writer of Hebrews is commending. Beginning in the 8th verse, the writer gives examples of such faith. "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he later would receive as his inheritance, obeyed & went, even tho' he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger, in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac & Jacob, who were heirs to him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect & builder is God.

Abraham was a person of faith because he went where God told him to go even

tho' he did not know where that
migue he. He was not faithful
simply because he believed in God.
He was faithful because he believed
God when God made him a promise
and he acted accordingly.

In 1963 I was a nurse. I had a
lover in N.C. I also had two very
young children. I didn't have a
lot of money but I wanted to go
to N.C. I had no idea that going
to N.C. would eventuate in years
later of my being an MCC minister
but it was the start of a journey
that would take me ~~from N.C.~~
~~back to 24 years later.~~ To a
college degree at Tulane, to teaching
for 11 years during the first years
of desegregation of the N.C. schools
back to N.Y. and finally to Boston
where I would go to Seminary
& be ordained in MCC. I have
always considered it my Abrahamic
journey. I could not see where
I was going but I was on a

journey that God had laid out and a path that God had meant me to be on.

Abraham lived in a tent in the wilderness because he believed that one day God would provide him a home in a "city - foundations, whose architect + builder is God." That's faith. People of faith move, regardless of their uncertainty, when God says move.

I am a very political person + some of my heroes come from the world of politics + government. One of them is Lech Walesa. He was a simple electrician working in the ship yards of Gdansk, Poland. He wasn't a religious man. He once said "I ~~looked~~ ^{pondered} on God's existence + looked for signs to confirm God's presence, but faith did not grow in me until life grew harder. The more difficult my path became, the closer I came to the faith."

He was imprisoned by the communists because he had so much influence over his fellow Poles. He was poorly educated + a poor speaker, but he had a brain

and he had friendships c̄ hundreds of other workers. He was convinced the communists were corrupt + he dreamed of a time when the workers of Poland would unite + do something about the unjust society they lived in.

In 1981 he founded the workers union Solidarity. This led to a confrontation c̄ the communist Polish government, the secret police put him under house arrest as they tried to break the power of Solidarity.

He spoke rough + ungrammatical Polish, but people listened. Overnight he became a symbol of courage. He later wrote: "God distinguishes each one of us from the others + assigns a task to each person... I simply believe in Providence. I believe I am here to execute the verdicts of Providence. It is good to have the awareness of that great force outside us + above us directing our fate."

Of course, when the communists were overthrown, Walesa became President of Poland.

Walesa was not a perfect President or a perfect person. He was simply a person of faith seeking to serve God.

Abraham wasn't a perfect person. Go back & read his story. But Abraham heard God's voice telling him to make a difference, to leave his home & go to a place that God would show him & he did. That's faith. Faith is jumping without being able to see where our feet will fall, not because we're foolhardy, but because we are heeding God's voice.

The writer of Hebrews cites the ancestors of the faith Abraham, Isaac, Jacob & later in the same chapter Moses, Joshua, Caleb & Rahab, Gideon & all the great heroes of the Bible who stepped forward when the times demanded it and then the writer says, "Friends, that's faith! That's what it looks like". It's not simply believing in a dead creed, it is serving a living God. "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

The world sorely needs people of such faith today. We have staggering problems

These politicians will never confront. We need people of integrity, people of courage, people of candor who will do the right thing, not the expedient thing.

Dr. Mickey Anderson tells about an intriguing program that was on NPR some time back. On his program "This American Life," host John Hodgman conducted an informal survey asking the following question: If you could choose, which would you prefer - the power of flight or the power of invisibility? Would you rather fly or be invisible?

When we were kids most of us longed for these gifts. We wanted to be invisible, particularly when we had done something wrong. And who wouldn't want to fly like Superman?

What John Hodgman found surprised him. No matter which power the people he talked to chose, they wanted to use their newly discovered power in self-serving ways. Their plans weren't heroic at all.

They didn't want to end organized crime or bring hope to the hopeless. They wanted to be invisible so they could ~~steal~~^{sneak} into movies, steal cashmere sweaters at fine department stores, spy on their coworkers, stalk their exes, hang around showers, eavesdrop on conversations or slip onto planes for free rides.

People who chose to fly would give up the cars, sell their cars; they would check out the bar scene^{of} flying in + around, hoping to get attention. They would fly off to Paris, Rio, or Madrid. When they could have chosen to use their powers to do something heroic, instead they chose to be trivial + self-serving.

Aburd - not really. We've all gotten to the point where we want to take care of #1. What courageous, unselfish, heroic acts have we done in the past 60 days. Why not? Of course, we can't be invisible or fly but still God has much that we can do.

When he was inaugurated President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela quoted

some words that convict us all.

He said, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure."

It's a scary thought "we are powerful beyond measure." We could do heroic things if we dared live out our faith. We don't. We take care of ourselves. We don't care about anyone else. We could change our families, change our community, change the world. Just imagine if the gay community would fight for gay marriage the way we fought AIDS in the 80's. Or fought for any one thing that we all wanted in the way we wanted you to stay alive. All we would have to do is be willing to jump when we cannot see where our feet may fall. All we have to do is be willing to work toward something together — maybe the coming of the DoG — in a world of selfishness, confusion + doubt. Instead,

we have imprisoned ourselves behind
a 3 foot high wall of doubt.

"By faith, Abraham, when called to go to
a place he would later receive as his
inheritance, obeyed and went, even
tho' he did not know where he was going,
By faith he made his home in the
promised land like a stranger in a
foreign ~~land~~ country; he lived in tents,
as did Isaac + Jacob, who were heirs
c him of the same promise. For he was
looking to the city c foundations, whose
architect and builder is God." That is
faith. Let's live by it.

Amen

12 after Pentecost
8/15/10

Two Fires

Isaiah 5:1-7, Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

There is something mysterious & provocative about fire. We don't need fireplaces when we have gas or electric heaters, but we have fireplaces anyway. We pay the utility company for gas starters for them, take a lot of time & effort to cut wood for them. The parsonage at Providence R.I. had a fireplace & we often would have Bible study watching the fire burn and feel closer to each other for it. We are fascinated by fire, ~~and~~ watching a fire is sometimes as close to meaningful prayer as some of us get.

The discovery of fire changed the life of primitive people. Fire made possible the change from a nomadic to a settled existence. With fire, vegetable cellulose could be cooked & eaten, so that the hunt no longer became the main struggle for nourishment.

Fire made us into farmers, & it that gave us the possibility of permanent towns & villages. It found us hunter gatherers and made us civilis - urbanites.

Fire also provided additional benefits. It could give warmth to the huts & caves where primitive people lived, allowing settled existence even in areas where there were moderate shifts in climate, and, of course, fire ~~helps~~ helped banish the fears & limitations of darkness.

Fire is certainly prominent in ancient folklore & ancient religion. Several old mythologies of various peoples say that fire is a special gift of the gods. Remember the tale of Prometheus, the god who felt sorry for humans? He stole fire from the gods' altar & gave it to mortals. These stories suggest humanity's reverence toward the mystery of fire. In Roman temples there was a central fire that burned continually, fueled & kept alive by men & women whose special duties

were to see that the fire never went out. Fire + spiritual experience are never widely separated. If you've ever been to youth camp + prayers around the campfire you have probably experienced that.

As we turn to the biblical record we also notice the prominent place of fire in religious experience. A burning bush that was not consumed caught the attention of Moses until he began to hear the voice of God. At the Jerusalem temple fire consumed the cereal + animal sacrifices offered by the priests + people, telling them of atonement + reconciliation between God + people. Luke's Pentecost account tells of "tongues of fire" sent by the HS as gifts to enable proclaiming the gospel in word + deed. In the biblical images of the end times fire is central in pointing to this consummation. The love of God is said to warm like fire.

And one of the greatest warnings in the Bible is in Hebrews where it says simply "Our God is a consuming fire."

All of this is to turn us to Jesus' words: "I came to cast fire upon the earth."

He does not mean this literally, but to describe himself as fire - the fire of judgment & the fire of the spirit.

Christ does not suffer fools without judgment. He doesn't let the religion leaders off easily. Unless we misread the gospels, we have to allow that Jesus called out judgment upon those whom he felt betrayed God by making religion too difficult for the ordinary person. But in many ways, he pidges us because our lives fall short of his.

Politicians blame us for the failure of modern marriage & the downfall of family values - but Jesus warned that family values would be overturned by Christianity.

I think sometimes we speak of X as the example of how we should live and make Christianity into a new set of laws

a religion of augs + shouds.
But if we think of X as a pattern
or example, we soon realize
that we desperately need to clean
up our act because compared
to him we come off poorly.

Excellence in any area is open
to judgment. I spent a year as
a teen at the ~~Art~~ Students ^{LEAGUE} ~~League~~
in Ky. In HS I had won some
prizes for watercolor + pastels +
I thought I was pretty good. Once
at art school I realized that I
would never be a really gifted
painter. I was okay, but not
great. And watching them paint
I figured I need another career
choice. I went to nursing school.

Judgment isn't theologically
popular today. In ~~the~~ medieval
times Xianity had a note of fiery
judgment more than in our times.
X was proclaimed as God's judgment
upon sins large + small. Some
churches still preach that. Martin
Luther struggled for years to ease

the terrors of this theology. Partly
thru Luther's experience, we have
softened this fiery, judgmental
understanding of X and we do not
want to return to it. Sometimes, tho'
we err in the opposite direction.
Everything is acceptable + it doesn't
matter who we hurt along the way.
X today is the figure of acceptance,
forgiveness, gentleness + warmth. We
forget that he was killed as a Radical.
Today few adults or children would
feel uncomfortable in his presence,
but he did once use a whip to
drive the money changers out of the
Temple - nothing judgmental there!
There certainly was ^{is} something unhealthy
about the terrors Luther knew - but
do we get away w/ everything we do
and does it not matter to God how
short we fall of X's example.

We tell ourselves "I'm okay, you're
okay." as if we measure up just by
being alive. Worse still, we allow
approval of policies + laws that are
unequal + detrimental to the poorest
among us

hardly ever setting them over against the example of Jesus. It was a psychiatrist not a pastor who asked "what ever became of sin?" and we certainly helped to bury the idea of sin because the finger was most often pointed at us for all the sexual sins of humanity & the social sins were largely ignored. We are so afraid of an unbalanced theology of God's judgment that we let terrible things happen & do not speak out - even when they affect us. We content ourselves to be only a small part of what God wants us to be.

The second fire of X is the fire of the Spirit. This fire is not implied in today's reading but there is a close connection between the HS & the Spirit of X. They are the same experience. Both are affirmations that God can create a new warmth & glow within us thru the fire of X's spirit.

C. S. Lewis once said that the gospel

was concerned to make "new people" rather than "nice people." The human need has always been for an inner transformation that makes us into new creatures. It is the warmth of the Spirit of X that accomplishes this. It is not something we can do for ourselves; it is the NT insistence on grace + gift - not work + merit. We cannot make ourselves into the sort of persons who are recognizable as the children of God. It takes the fire of X's Spirit to inspire + sustain the growth of love + grace within us.

The HS does not force itself into our lives. We have to invite God's + X's spirit in. TV signals are all around us all the time. But nothing happens until we turn the TV on, select a channel, and find the picture. X's spirit is always surrounding us, wanting to be invited in, but until we open ourselves to the spirit, its transforming work will not have a chance at us. It is grace that there is this redeeming free of X. often we don't realize that this is happening.

It's only afterwards that we see what X's spirit has been doing in our lives. Think about the disciples after Jesus' Crucifixion. The gospels say they fled to Galilee + presumably began to take up their former lives. They were deeply shattered by Jesus' death, and began to think it had all been for nothing. So they resumed fishing, tax collecting, their trades + ways of life that had been theirs before going off w/ Jesus.

Then they began to discover something strange about themselves. They were not the same people they had been before Jesus. They couldn't settle down to their former way of life. Everything seemed different. They really did trust God, they did forgive others, they had an intense desire to please God. Most of all they felt compelled to take up the work + message of X again. So therefore the fire of X's spirit had done its work of change.

So X is "fire" in a double sense. He is the fire of God's judgment

He tells us when we are living dangerously, that $\bar{\epsilon}$ God we have no real present joys + satisfactions. X is also the warming fire of the transforming power of the Spirit, forming us into the joyful sons + daughters of God, with lives + deeds to match. Both these fires of X are essential to our spiritual pilgrimage and we need both of them.

"I came to cast fire on the earth" This fire can change your life. Be open to the fire God rains down from heaven. Open your heart to God in X that will strengthen + help you. That's the fire that X Jesus promises us. Amen

13th after Pentecost
8/22/10

How Stand Up Straight

Jeremiah 1:4-10, Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

I like to read. I like to buy books. Sometimes I buy books + don't get around to reading them for years, but I know they're there until I get a chance to get to them. There's a book called Turning Saved Home that I bought a while back, but just got around to. It's the story of Joyce Hallyday's journey from privilege in Hershey, PA to the Soujourner's Community in Wash DC.

Soujourner's is a group of people who intentionally live a Christian life in the middle of poor neighborhoods.

They do that as Christians to identify c̄ the poor following Jesus' example.

Hallyday talks about some of the families she worked c̄ as a Soujourner.

One consisted of 3 generations of women all of whom, in early adolescence, were either raped or molested, all had had babies while they were in their teens. All were continually the victims of domestic violence. And all thought they deserved it.

They had all had wonderful hopes as young girls but they had been defeated by poverty, by circumstances they couldn't control or by their own defeated spirits. They believed they deserved nothing greater than the life they were living right now.

When we were working on Inclusive Language in MCC we discovered that as many as 3 out of 5 women pastors in MCC had been molested as children, been raped, been the victims of incest or had had unwanted advances made to them by a family member. And this was a group of lesbian women who were mostly middle-class + probably better educated than most women.

The terrible thing we learned was that if there was violence against women, then religion was its ally. All religions teach male superiority - including most Christian churches. Just think back to the women we met when we debated the Church of X. Most churches teach that women are subordinate to men and that men have to beware of them because by nature they are temptresses.

It's why Paul tells women to keep their heads covered in the church. All this brought about because I was reading a book. Books are dangerous things - they will get you in trouble.

Then I started working on this sermon. The text for this morning is the story of the bent-over woman, whom Jesus healed on the Sabbath. I realized that I had always read it as a story against the Sabbath laws, but it, is really an emancipation proclamation. The 4th of the 10 commandments says "you shall remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." Jesus healed the woman on the Sabbath. The religious leaders objected. They said, "You have broken the Sabbath laws." Jesus said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger & lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?"

Jesus doesn't argue the sabbath laws here. He'll do that other times. His disciples are hungry; They walk through a field of grain. They pick + eat the grain on the sabbath. He is criticized by the scribes + Pharisees.

Jesus argues: "the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath." He doesn't say that here. Instead he argues the 10th commandment: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, wife, manservant, maidservant. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's ox, ass, or anything that is your neighbor's property."

Here he argues that 10th commandment. "You hypocrites! Don't you untie your ox or don on the sabbath and lead it to water?" According to the 10th commandment, women are property. Women, according to the property scale of the 10th commandment are above the servants + slaves, but below the house.

So when Jesus says, "You'll water your ox + your donkey on the sabbath, but not heal a woman." he says there is something terribly wrong in this society. When he heals her he is saying,

"You are not property, you are a child of God," and when he said, "You are a daughter of ^{Abraham} ~~Abraham~~," He was saying, you are equal to the men.

Before this only men were members of the covenant that God had entered with Abraham. By saying "You are a daughter of Abraham" he was saying — you are equal to men + entitled to all the grace + goodness of life, just as they are.

No, this is not a passage about sabbath laws, this is an emancipation proclamation.

"Jesus came upon a woman who had been bent over for 18 years." Women as a whole throughout history have been the main ones bent over by poverty — they earn less than men — victims of violence, discriminated against by churches who deny them the freedom of reproductive choice.

"When Jesus saw her, he called to her + said to her 'Woman you are free' and he laid his hands on her + immediately she stood up straight," which means, when Jesus touched her life, she gained

dignity, she became a woman of worth, freed from all the burdens that had tied her down.

All these stories about Jesus' encounters & people are there to give us illustrations of what it means to encounter Jesus. ^{the DOG}

If you are beat over because of abuse & discrimination from the outside, or if you are beat over because of feelings of inferiority & insecurity about yourself from the inside, to have Jesus touch your life will mean you can stand tall & move & dignity thru life from then on.

Emily Dickinson wrote:

We never know how high we are
Until we are asked to rise.

And then if we are true to plan
Our statures reach the skies.

This story is about a beat-over woman & is particularly appropriate for women, but Jesus had the same effect on everyone who felt they were not who they were created to be. In Luke, they were often women - Jesus is always associating & women, raising them to dignity.

But there were also others, who because of who they were, or because of what happened to them, or because of what they had done in the past, were categorized + labeled, marginalized, ostracized or demonized. And Jesus went to every one of them, women + men + touched them + they stood up straight + tall.

Remember the passage from Galatians we read earlier this year: For as many of you as were baptized into X have put on X. Therefore, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

In the first century, in that society, foreigners, slaves + women were all less, all subordinate, all inferior; even all, in fact, considered to be contaminated. They had to go thru rituals of purification before they could associate w the "righteous". Society treated them as inferior. As a result, they thought of themselves that way.

And they acted that way. Until Jesus touched them. And they cleansed and stood tall. "you never know how high you are until you are asked to rise."

I remember back to the 80's when AIDS first hit our community hard. When we first made hospital visits the nurses would make us put on paper gowns + masks + gloves. We knew that HIV could not be spread thru touch - but they didn't + the thing that mattered most to our patients was when we touched them. We brought to each other a sense of humanity, a sense of dignity, a sense of worth + respect as a child of God, just by touching those who had been told by society that they were untouchable. (and that is called "healing." You can't cure everything, but you ~~can~~^{can} heal everyone. You can make whole. That's what healing is. That's what salvation means. It means to restore life, to be made whole again.

I have a facebook page and one of the most

gratifying thing for me is for someone I haven't heard from in years to contact me thru facebook + tell me what the church has done for them or I have done for them over the years. Just being part of an MCC church and finding the acceptance by God has changed people's lives. Their lives have been made new + people who were bent over now stand tall.

Too many churches are still where the organized religious leaders of Jesus time were in X's day. The woman in the story was released of 18 years of binding pain. A true community would fall to its knees out of gratitude + in worship of Jesus, forget the offering + the worship order. They would just sit in awe of God's goodness + mercy. Yet the Religious leaders see this woman as a distraction.

One Saturday morning, the Bearer of Salvation walked into the synagogue + they sent him out because he had upset the established order.

In Luke's gospel, this was Jesus' last visit to a synagogue. He extended his hand to the religious one last time & they would not take it. ~~Jesus~~ In the process, they look like fools. They go from being indignant to being humiliated.

Where are we in this picture? Are we the fools who can't move to the side for Jesus? Are we the hypocrites who are so hardened by what the Church is they can't see the need for healing crying out all around us. Are we the idiots who can't see the point of the text because an "i" was left uncrossed or a "+" uncrossed?

God, remind us that our salvation is based upon being set free & not worrying about who gets the glory. Let us celebrate restoration - hers & ours, and if we do that we will all stand up tall, loved & forgiven.

Amen

14 after Pentecost
8/29/10

Becoming One of the Beautiful People
Jeremiah 2: 4-13, Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16
Luke 14: ~~7-14~~ 1, 7-14

We all want to be recognized, appreciated, made to ~~feel~~ feel important. We all want to be somebody. A banker was visiting a customer's farm. He nodded to a figure in the farm-yard. "I suppose that's the hired man," he said. "Naw," the farmer replied. "That's the first vice-president in charge of cows."

We all want to believe we are important. We want to be recognized. Alex Haley, the author of Roots, served in the Coast Guard in WW II. Because he is a black man, Haley's jobs were limited to the kitchen. One job was serving coffee to the captain, who was usually so busy reading magazines that he ignored the person serving him.

But one day the captain observed, as he lifted his cup, "There's a good article here by an Alex Haley. Same name as you." The server replied "I am the Alex Haley who wrote the article."

after that the captain made fewer calls for coffee + many more for conversations ^{to} the author.

We want to be appreciated. We want to be recognized. We want to know that someone notices us.

There's a company in NY called "Tracers" that specializes in finding lost people. The owner says that more wives than ever are running away. It's not that they are taking up ^{new} men, but they're ~~bound~~^{BOUND} & feel there must be more to life than playing handmaiden to unappreciative husbands. A clue to why they feel that way lies in this little bit of information: when a man comes to Tracers for help in finding his wife, the agency asks questions about the wife's personal history + personal appearance. Most often the inquiring husband is unable to remember the color of his ^{missing} wife's eyes.

William James, the Harvard psychologist said, "The deepest principle of human nature is the craving to be appreciated."

One reason people get in trouble

is because they want someone to notice them, we know it is common for children to misbehave in order to get attention. Many ~~adults~~ adults misbehave for the same reason.

People will go to great lengths to be noticed, to be recognized - even to their own detriment.

Sometimes people surround themselves with "things" as a sign of their importance. Years ago there was a slogan, "He who dies with the most toys wins." Kids today have to have the most & the latest electronic "toys".

Before I became a teacher, I worked for one of the Sunday School teachers at First Bapt Church in W.D. She & her husband ran the Dale Carnegie Course in town. One of the things the Dale Carnegie Sales Course suggested to salesmen taking the course was that they always keep a \$100 dollar bill in their wallets. It would make them feel successful - that they could have what ^{ever} they wanted. It made them feel like they were one of the beautiful people - rich.

Actually, it just made them one of the gullible people. It's a game - a silly game. Even churches play silly status games.

For example, the word pew comes from the French word pue "POUE" which means "raised place." In the early years of colonial America, some prominent families were allowed to sit in roped off sections, separate from "the rabble." These roped off sections were known as pews. When the church finally realized that this tradition was insane, not to mention unbiblical, it disposed of pews. All the benches in a church were called pews. In the 1700's some families were allowed to buy their pews. Really wealthy families had box pews, ⁱⁿ which they installed armchairs + had fire boxes, because churches were unheated - while the ordinary people were cold. The church games weren't any different in their attempt to gain status, importance, prestige.

Jesus was in the home of a prominent official. He noticed that all who came to dinner were trying to sit near the head of the table so people would recognize that they were important. Jesus gave them this advice: "If you are invited to a wedding ~~part~~, don't always head for the best seat. For if someone more respected than you shows up, the host will bring him over to where you are sitting and say, 'Let this person sit here instead.' And you, embarrassed, will have to take whatever seat is left at the foot of the table! Do this instead, start at the foot; & when your host sees you he will ~~say~~ ^{come} & say, 'Friend, we have a better place than this for you!' Thus you will be honored in front of all the other guests. For everyone who tries to honor himself shall be humbled; and the one who humbles himself or herself shall be honored."

So it's all right, Jesus says, to want to be important. It's perfectly natural

to want to sit in an honored seat. However, he says, most of us follow the wrong strategy. We get all puffed up & think that makes us more important. We couldn't be more wrong. There is nothing more beautiful than genuine humility, nothing more attractive than a warm, relaxed smile, nothing more winning than a sense of confidence that wherever your seat is, it's the best seat in the house.

However, if you really want to be important, there is one more thing you can do.

Jesus turned to his host: "When you put on a dinner, don't invite friends, relatives & rich neighbors! For they will return the invitation. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame & the blind. Then at the resurrection of the dead, God will reward you for inviting those who can't repay you."

Robert Coles, the psychiatrist, writes books & teaches at Harvard. He wrote a book about Dorothy Day. Day was a famous Catholic social worker.

*The Catholic Worker

She started a mission in downtown NY* where anyone who needed it could have a meal, a change of clothes, a chance to talk to someone who understood. When Cole was a ^{medical} student at Harvard, he volunteered to work at the Catholic Worker. He was a Harvard graduate, was in medical school, was going to be a psychiatrist. In our society, that's about as good as it gets. He knew that. He was really proud of it. He was also proud that as a person - all these credentials he was volunteering to help the poor. It was the kind of thing people would set up & take notice of. He arrived at the Catholic Worker. He asked to see Dorothy Day. He went right to the top. The person said she was in the kitchen. He went to the kitchen, saw her sitting at the table, talking to someone. Cole had enough training to recognize that the person she was talking to was addicted to a dangerous substance. He was dirty & disheveled. He was obviously a street person. She was sitting at the table - him, listening.

intently to what he had to say. Now I want you to have in mind Jesus' parable of the banquet ~~table~~ and the seats at the table and where one is supposed to be at that banquet.

She's at the table & a street person, giving him her full attention. So she didn't notice Cole come into the room. He stood by the door waiting for her to finish. When she finished the conversation she stood up. That's when she noticed Cole. She asked, "Do you want to speak to one of us?"

He was astounded. Dorothy Day was famous. This man was a nobody. He was a derelict. "You want to speak to one of us?" Cole had never seen anything like this before. Humility that can identify & another person so completely as to remove all distinctions between them. Humility that can cut thru all the boundaries, all the categories that society sets up to separate us from one another. There were just two people - to her he was her brother & she was concerned about him.

Cole said it changed his life. He said he learned more in that one moment than

he did in 4 years at Harvard. He said
in that one moment what it means
to humble yourself as Jesus did, "who
did not count ~~it~~ equality $\bar{c}$ God a
thing, to be grasped at but humbled
himself, & took on the form of a servant,"
"For ~~those~~ ^{those} who ~~humble~~ ^{exalts} themselves
will be ~~exalted~~ ^{humbled}, & the ~~one~~ ^{to those} who exalts
themselves will be humbled." 4

The most important people in the
world are those who care for the
lost and lonely. They are beautiful.
Was there ever anyone more beautiful
than Mother Teresa? Mother Teresa's
death came at the same time as the
death of one of the world's most famous
beautiful people - Princess Diana.

Diana was a woman $\bar{c}$ many frailties
but she was fondly remembered by
people all over the world for her
compassion. She cared for children.
She cared for people $\bar{c}$ HIV.

Want to be a really important
beautiful person? Look around for
someone in need & make a sincere
attempt

to help. A person in need is not necessarily someone who is poor. They may be someone who is just lonely, or someone who is misunderstood. They may be someone feeling rejected by their neighbors or by God. There are many needy people in the world. We meet them every day. If you really want to become part of God's important people, see what you can do for them.

"God will repay you," Jesus said, "for inviting those who can't repay you."

When God throws a banquet, you never know who will be there, or who you will sit next to. The banker will be seated next to the panhandler he always passed on the way to work. The store owner will be next to the person he just fired. The doctor will be next to the person who just sued him for malpractice. Rush Limbaugh will be seated next to Keith Olbermann. A prostitute will be seated next to the pope.

All the "right" people will be there—everyone who responds to God's invitation.

and seated next to Jesus, the host, in the places of honor are not the dignitaries, the distinguished people of position + prominence, but rather the "important" people, the poor, the hurting, the outcast - people who have distinguished themselves only by their need.

And everyone will get along. And at the banquet in the D of G, you + I may find ourselves seated next to ~~* engaging in conversation =~~ people we presently can't stand or who can't stand us. But the old anger, hurt and grudges will be gone + reconciliation will come. At God's table, the barriers that keep people apart - rich/poor, upper/lower class, black/white, Republican/Democrat, gay/straight, friend/foe, the dividing walls of hostility will come crashing down. We will all be important. And God's banquet feast will be the most remarkable party ever thrown.

The D of G is a party! And Jesus knows how to invite the really important people, all those who accept his invitation. Amen

and that new to Japan, the last
in the series of books on the
history of the Chinese people
written by the Chinese people
the "Chinese" people, the
the "Chinese" people, the
the "Chinese" people, the

15th after Pentecost
9/5/10

In the Potter's Hands

Jeremiah 18:1-11, Philemon 1:21

Luke 14:25-33 (34-35)

My training pastor was a potter. Gil made beautiful things out of clay. One of the things he made was a pottery chalice for us at MCC-NY. One day a very angry drag queen came into the church before service, grabbed the chalice & threw it against the communion table. It shattered into pieces & grape juice poured all over the front of the communion table and the carpet in front of the altar. A very beautiful piece of pottery was broken in a very ^{OUTRAGEOUS} ~~disheartening~~ act. We all stood in the front of the church, shocked and awed into silence by an act which ^{was sacrilegious} ~~dishonored~~ God. That poor drag queen blamed the church - any church for the pain which religion had inflicted on him. We were part of a church trying to heal his pain, but he was past thinking that any church could keep him.

As I was reading the scripture about potters & pottery, I couldn't keep but think about that broken chalice.

Crafting pottery is probably one of the oldest professions. Fragments of earthenware & pottery have been unearthed in some of the world's oldest settlements. They've been gathered & studied by archeologists to understand something of the lives of the ^{ancient} inhabitants of the Middle East and most other ancient cultures throughout the world.

Now most of us can't remember when there weren't plastic cups, bottles, dishes & grocery bags. But for thousands of years various forms of pottery, hollowed-out gourds, & pieces of animal hide were used to transport water & grain from one place to another, to prepare meals & secure precious documents - like the Dead Sea Scrolls being sealed in clay jars & hidden in caves to secure them from the Greeks or the Romans.

Even clay figurines were made to serve as earthly reminders of the

early peoples "gods."

Archaeologists tell us that by the time of the prophet Jeremiah, pottery was used for storing food + ailments, for carrying water, as standard measurements for grain + oil, and for washing clothes. Oil lamps were also crafted from clay + fired in ovens. Every community would have at least one potter who could supply the needs of the inhabitants. Because pottery was easily broken there was always a strong demand for the potter's wares. It was a common fact of life that some of the household's water jars would be dropped or broken + even the broken pieces or shards would be kept and used to write on + keep figures on, ~~as that~~ ^{in a} society that used paper or papyrus sparingly because it was scarce + difficult to make.

When Jeremiah is directed to go down to the potter's house, it was likely a familiar place to him.

God's intent in Jeremiah's parable is to provide a highly recognizable visual aid to make a case for God's anger $\bar{c}$ Israel. As Jeremiah watches the potter, he finds that the vessel on which the artisan is working is not measuring up to the potter's plan for it. It's not going to be the vessel that was intended. ^{or, clay} ^{modeling} As many of us have done $\bar{c}$ Play Dough or clay, the potter abandons the form by folding the partially formed vessel in on itself. The potter reshapes it into a single lump of clay, so that it can be reworked into a vessel which is more pleasing.

When the word of God comes to Jeremiah, we discover that God identifies very closely $\bar{c}$ this potter. Throughout scripture the image of humanity as clay in God's hands is a very familiar one. Job says: "Your hands fashioned + made me; and now you turn + destroy me. Remember that you fashioned me like clay; and will you turn me to dust again?"

Job, even in the midst of great suffering, acknowledges God's right to destroy him.

Isaiah says: "You, O God, are our Father; we are the clay & you are our potter; we are the work of your hand."

When Israel got in trouble, Isaiah has God say: "You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Shall the thing made say of its maker, 'You did not make me'; or the thing formed say of ~~the~~ the one who formed it, 'You have no understanding'."

As humans, we turn things upside down — like that angry drag queen in U.S. We are the one who lack understanding. We believe that we ourselves are the final authority on how we should live. We choose to act selfishly toward others & contempt toward God, as if to say, "You didn't make me." We make life all about ourselves — what we need, what we want & how we are going to get it, because we think of God "You don't understand!"

Just exactly what is it that we think God doesn't understand?

Is it our need to be in control? Is it our search for meaning + purpose? We forget that God does understand, because God made us - because we have been made in God's image, we run away from God just as Israel ran away from God + strayed over into idolatry. We, too, make our own gods. And then God says to Jeremiah "Can I not do $\bar{e}$ you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done. Just like the clay in the potter's hands, so are you in my hands, O house of Israel."

God's human creation has become something other than what God created them to be. Like the spoiled vessel on the potter's wheel, we do not resemble the vision God had for us. So, like the potter, God has the right, ^{+ the responsibility}, as an artisan, to collapse the spoiled vessel, add more water, & work it once more to achieve the desired result. God will not throw out the clay, for it is valuable + holds the promise of something beautiful within, but to release its beauty + purpose

the clay needs to be reformed in the potter's hands.

The people of Jeremiah's day were not prepared for how God would reform them. Israel was defeated by Assyria + led to live in exile in the land of their enemies, + Judah would face defeat at the hands of Babylon, and the leaders + artisans would be forcibly relocated to Babylon. The 40 years they would spend in exile would be a time of loss + grief.

We've been there. For many of us the years we spent in exile away from the church reformed us into a people more responsive to God. Through the experience of exile, the clay that is God's people is reshaped by God's promises into a people more closely resembling God's original intent for them.

Even tho' we often fall short of God's intention, even tho' we "turn things upside down" in our hunger for control +

our misguided ideas about meaning + purpose, God, in grace, places us in Jesus' hands and just as we ~~are~~ⁱⁿ baptism are joined in Jesus' death + resurrection, we find newness of life.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, declares: But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be visible in our bodies."

The treasure in fragile clay jars is our lives, formed by the hand of God, according to God's plan for all creation. God's light shines thru the cracks + flaws that define us.

It is no accident that we have ^{pieces of} priceless pottery. These communion vessels are one of a kind. No two are alike. You + I are priceless clay

vessels. No two of us are alike. Some of us are beautiful. Some of us are cracked pots. God loves us all ~~alike~~ like there was only one of us. And as I keep saying, God loves us as we are, but loves us too much to let us stay that way.

We will be remolded + reshaped by God, sometimes in dramatic ways, sometimes in imperceptible, subtle ways. But no matter what, God's purpose in reshaping us is always the same: that we might more faithfully reflect God to the world around us.

So we put ourselves in the Potter's hands, making the words of our communion hymn our daily prayer:

Have thine own way, Lord!

Have thine own way!

Thou art the Potter; I am the clay.

Mold me and make me after Thy will
While I am waiting, yielded + still.

In the name of Jesus,
amen.

...the fact that the ...
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16 after Pentecost
8/12/10

Help Me, I'm Lost

Jeremiah 4: 11-12, 22-28, 1 Timothy 1: 12-17

Luke 15: 1-10

It was one of the greatest adventure stories of all time. Thor Heyerdahl wanted to test the theory that people from S. Am. could have settled the Polynesian Islands in the S. Pacific long before Columbus sailed to the New World.

So Heyerdahl took a small team to Peru, where they constructed a raft out of balsa logs. They tied the logs together with rope, much as a group of sailors might have done in earlier, less sophisticated times. The raft was named Kon-Tiki. Six men set out from Peru on April 28, 1947. They sailed that raft 4300 miles across the Pacific before crashing into a reef in Polynesia 101 days later. They had accomplished their goal.

During the 3 month journey, they had little control of the raft & no way to direct, control or stop its forward progress. They learned that anything dropped overboard was almost impossible to recover once the raft left it behind.

Two months into the voyage, Thousands of miles from land, Herman fell overboard. The raft, driven by a strong wind in a heavy sea, moved ahead faster than Herman could swim. The five on the raft were horrified. They tried to throw him a life belt on a rope, but the wind blew it back to them. In seconds, Herman was all but lost to sight.

Suddenly, a man named Knute, grabbed a life belt & dove into the water. He swam back to Herman & wrapped his arms around him, holding his exhausted friend & the rope while the 4 men on the ~~boat~~^{raft} pulled them back. All 6 men subsequently finished the journey unharmed.

The Pacific is a very big ocean as a 12 y.o. once opined, "It's a big ocean to be lost in."

It's a big world to be lost in, too. And we get lost - we get mixed up & lost overboard. We make mistakes, we despair. We do evil to each other. And then there's ^{God}.

Being lost made me think about these two parables: The lost sheep & the lost coin.

It's important to be aware of who was present when Jesus told these parables.

Luke tells us that tax collectors + "sinners" were gathering around to hear Jesus. They evidently were hungry to hear what Jesus had to say.

Nearby were the Pharisees + the teachers of the law. They had not come to learn from Jesus, but to criticize him. They muttered + scorn, "This man welcomes sinners + eats + them."

It was important in the ancient world who you ate + - and Jesus was always eating + the wrong people.

With this mixed audience in mind, Jesus tells one of his stories, his parables: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them," he begins. "Doesn't he leave the 99 out in the open country + go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And, when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends + neighbors together + says, 'Rejoice + me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent."

While they were digesting this little story, he tells another:

"Suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house & search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends & neighbors together & says, 'Rejoice $\bar{\imath}$ me; I have found my lost ~~coin~~ ^{coin}.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of ^{the} angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Sheep get lost. Sheep nibble themselves lost. A shepherd was responsible for the sheep. If a sheep was killed, the shepherd had to bring home the fleece to show how it had died. The shepherds were experts at tracking & could follow the footprints of a straying sheep a long way. It was often part of a shepherd's job to risk his life for a sheep. A straying sheep could lose its landmarks and bleat helplessly at the edge of a precipice.

It would be easy to lose a coin in most Palestinian homes of the day. Most of the houses were dark. The floors were beaten earth covered $\bar{\imath}$ dry reed & rushes.

It was easy to lose a coin on such a floor. Perhaps the woman needed to find the coin out of economic necessity - or more likely it was one of the 10 silver coins that made up the head-dress of the married woman. It was her dowry & she would not easily let it go. It was like our wedding rings - precious.

But Jesus wasn't talking about sheep & coins. He was talking about people, helpless people. It's important to note the element of helplessness in these two parables.

The lost sheep could not have found its way back into the shelter of the sheep fold. It was lost & helpless.

Notice that ~~it~~ the shepherd puts it on his shoulders & carries it home.

And the lost coin could not have found its way back to the woman's head-dress. Both the sheep & the coin were as helpless as Herman Jew as seen from the Kon-Tiki.

How many times as professional clergy or social workers or teachers

have me gotten frustrated & people who have deep-seated problems. "Why can't they just help themselves?" Well, there's something we need to understand. When it comes to our salvation, we can't just help ourselves. There is no self-help program that is going to earn you salvation. You can't think yourself to Jesus, we can't work ourselves to Jesus, we can't even clean up our act enough to get to Jesus. Salvation is a gift. That's why Paul says in Romans "you see, at the right time, when we were still powerless, X died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for one who is righteous, tho' for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrated His love for us in this: while we were still ~~sinners~~ sinners, X died for us."

This theme was important to Jesus & to Paul. They saw the dangers of people believing that they were among the spiritual elite & believed that they had achieved this status by their own doing. Such an attitude breeds pride. Jesus doesn't need any more ~~saving~~, self-righteous followers

looking down their long spiritually superior noses at the great unwashed rest of us.

It's like the story of Mildred, the self-appointed church gossip who kept sticking her nose into the other members' personal lives. She made a mistake, however, when she spread the word that George, a new member, was an alcoholic, after she saw his truck parked in front of a bar one afternoon.

George, a man of few words, quietly parked his pickup in front of Mildred's house... and left it there all night.

No, Jesus certainly doesn't need any more smug, self-righteous followers looking down on others. That was the chief problem of the Pharisees & teachers of the law. They were leaders in their community, blameless to a fault, except for one serious flaw. They let their religion get in the way of their love for people. In their eyes, they were superior

things, particularly in regard to the sinners and tax collectors who were also in the audience as Jesus taught. They did not know that there is no such thing as spiritual superiority in the D of G. We are all sinners saved by grace. You see, Jesus is willing to go looking for all of us - no matter how low we are. That's what the cross says to us. There is no length to which God will not go to rescue even one solitary soul no matter how far they have wandered away. And when that one lost person is found, all of heaven rejoices.

Someone once said that "sin is what I don't do." So we sit back and feel superior to someone who is worse off than we are. There's nothing worse than a dry drunk who thinks he or she is superior to the one who is still drinking. There, but for the grace of God, go any of us.

This brings us to the next thing we need to see: we are the lost sheep & the lost coin. We all are. Paul says, "there is none that is righteous, no not one."

We are the last ones if we have never known or have forgotten the love of God in X Jesus. Sometimes we need an altar call to remind ourselves how far we have wandered away from God's love and God's love for everyone.

The poet, Carol Wimmer, was concerned about the self-righteous, judgmental spirit she was seeing in some people because she felt strongly that being judgmental is a perversion of the Xtian faith. So she wrote a poem about it. It's called "When I say that I'm a Xtian" and it reads like this: "When I say 'I'm a Xtian', I'm not shouting 'I've been saved!' I'm whispering, 'I got lost!' That's why I chose this way."

When I say 'I'm a Xtian', I don't speak in human pride. I'm confessing that I stumble - needing God to be my guide.

When I say, 'I'm a Xtian', I'm not trying to be strong. I'm professing that I'm weak + pray for strength to carry on.

When I say, 'I'm a Xtian' I'm not bragging of success. I'm admitting that I've failed & cannot ever pay the debt.

When I say 'I'm a Xtian', I don't think I know it all. I submit to my confusion, asking humbly to be taught.

When I say, 'I'm a Xtian', I'm not claiming to be perfect. My flaws are far too visible, but God believes I'm worth it.

When I say, 'I'm a Xtian', I still feel the sting of pain. I have my share of heartache which is why I seek ~~His~~ name.

When I say, 'I'm a Xtian', I do not wish to judge. I have no authority. I only know I'm loved.

Jesus was telling these parables to a crowd that included scribes & Pharisees, as well as sinners and tax-collectors. Jesus wanted them to see that none of them had an exclusive claim on the D of G. We are all sinners saved by grace. Consequently,

We dare not look down on anyone else. Each of us is precious to God & so is everyone else on earth. That makes us children of God & makes us brothers & sisters, whoever we may be, whatever our rank ~~or~~ or station.

The scribes & Pharisees could not see the tax collectors & sinners as their brothers & sisters. They looked on them as riff-raff, scum, unworthy of their consideration. I wonder if we don't look like riff-raff to God? But we don't. When God looks at us, God sees something beautiful and worthwhile, something worth giving Jesus for. That's how we need to look at the world for whom X died.

God loves us even when we are unlovable. There is rejoicing in heaven whenever one who has been lost is found. Because we were lost before God found us, we need to regard everyone else as ~~precious~~ precious souls for whom X died as well. Don't fall into the trap of being a Pharisee, home - that's all.
amen.

17th after Pentecost
9/19/10

There's Something About Cow Men
Jeremiah 8:18-19-1, 1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

There's an old story about a young man from Montana who bought a horse from a farmer for \$100.00. The farmer agreed to deliver the horse the next day. However, when the next day arrived, the farmer reneged on his promise.

"I'm afraid the horse died," he explained. The young man said, "Then give me my money back." The farmer said, "I can't do that. I spent it already."

The young man thought a moment + said, "OK then, just bring me the dead horse." The farmer asked, "What are you going to do with a dead horse?" The young man said, "I'm gonna raffle it off." The farmer said, "You can't raffle off a dead horse." The young man said, "Sure I can, watch me. I won't tell anyone he's dead."

A month later the farmer met up with the young man and asked, "What happened with that dead horse?" The young man said, "I raffled him off."

I sold 500 tickets at \$2⁰⁰ apiece & made a profit of \$998⁰⁰. The farmer asked, "Didn't anyone complain?" The young man said, "Just the guy who won. So I gave him his \$2.00 back."

Now, there's a con man. There's something about a con man that captures the imagination. There have been movies and TV shows lately in which the hero is a former con man now using his creative skills for better things - like the law.

Jesus once told a parable about a man with a wily disposition. He was something of a con man. Today's reading, from Luke tells the story.

There was a rich man who had a manager of his estate. The manager, unfortunately, was a bit lax in his oversight of the master's affairs. The master finally decided he'd had enough. He called this manager in, told him he was ^{4:14} fired, and demanded he provide an accounting of his work.

The terrified manager was beside himself, in fear. "What shall I do now?" he wondered

to himself. "My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig and I'm ashamed to beg." Then he hatched a plan. He called in each of his master's debtors one at a time. He asked the first, "How much do you owe ~~my~~ my master?" "800 gallons of ~~oil~~ olive oil," the first debtor said, the manager told him, "Take the bill, sit down quickly, & make it 400 gallons." Then he asked the second, "And how much do you owe?" "A thousand bushels of wheat," he replied, the desperate manager said, "Take your bill & make it 800."

This guy's ethics were out of whack, but his sense of survival was kicking in at full speed. He used his privileged position to buy himself some friends so that he would have somewhere to turn when he was out of a job.

First century culture was organized and orchestrated by strict social rules. The rules of reciprocal hospitality were in no way optional. Rather,

They were the ligaments that bound together status + honor, safeguarding roles + responsibilities thru relationships. The dishonest manager had no doubt that he would be able to collect on the favors owed him when the time came. He would get by, despite his looming unemployment, because he ~~KNOWS~~^{KNOW} how to work the system in more modern terms of the network — because he knows how to make the net work.

Sure, the manager was taking a risk — the risk that his master would have him thrown in jail. That's what should have happened. But this is Jesus' parable and let's face it, Jesus sometimes did unorthodox things.

Jesus doesn't admire the thorns in the manager's devious situation. Neither does Jesus concern himself with the man's self-serving character. What Jesus focuses on is the results of the manager's shrewdness. Jesus sees someone unafraid to push the accepted limits to bring about needed change. And he sees in the shrewdness something the disciples could learn from.

Listen to how Jesus ends this little story:
"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing $\bar{c}$ their own kind than are the people of light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

In most of Jesus' parables, the master represents God. What does this mean? God loves *con* men? That sounds outrageous. The movies glamorize *con* men, but the truth is that they take advantage of weak + unsuspecting people. I suspect that God would love to change *con* men/women. However, for 2000 years, people of faith have struggled $\bar{c}$ this parable - which is exactly what Jesus intended. Jesus wants us to puzzle over his teachings. He wants to stretch our minds & our faith. This is how we grow. Let's face it, a lot of people have superficial faith to which they have never given 5 minutes

of thought in their entire lives.

Let's think about why Jesus commended the dishonest manager.

First, Jesus liked people of action. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, what made the Samaritan "good"? Did he keep all the commandments? We don't know. Did he subscribe to all the articles of orthodox faith. No - he's a Samaritan. He only follows the first five books, not the writings or the prophets. He was outside the main stream of faith. What makes him "good": He saw a person in need & helped.

Remember? A priest walked by. You don't get much holier than that, but what did he do? He kept on walking. A teacher of the law came by - the very picture of respectability, what did he do? Absolutely nothing. He just kept on going. But the despised Samaritan saw someone who needed help and was moved to action.

Jesus has enough hand-wringers in the world. You know them. They're the people who look at the world's problems & say,

"Someone ought to do something," well, yes they should. Better yet, we should. Everyone should. There are times that call for immediate action.

Sometimes action requires that we be smart.

Henry Ford was known for both his frugality & his philanthropy. He was visiting his family's ancestral village in Ireland when two trustees of the local hospital found out he was there. They managed to get in to see him.

They talked him into giving \$5000. This was in the 1930's when 5000 was a lot of money. The next morning, at breakfast, he opened his newspaper to read the banner headline: "American millionaire gives \$50,000 to local hospital."

Ford wasted no time in summoning the two hospital trustees. He waved the newspaper in their faces, "What does this mean?" he demanded. The trustees apologized profusely, "Dreadful error" they said. They promised to get the editor to print a retraction the very next day,

stating that the great Henry Ford hadn't given \$50,000 but only \$5000. Well, hearing that, Ford offered them the other \$45,000 under one condition: that the trustees erect a marble arch at the entrance of the new hospital, with a plaque that ~~read~~ read, "I walked among you + you took me in."

Some people have to be motivated into action!

A second reason this parable makes sense is that people facing difficult situations become paralyzed in fear.

You realize, of course, that one reason people come to religion is that they are afraid. Religion helps them deal in a stressful world. So when some people have a problem, they pray + they pray + they pray. And they wait + they wait + they wait some more. And all the while they are being very religious. The problem is that at the same time they are praying + waiting, God is also waiting for them to do something about their own situation. Please don't misunderstand. God wants

us to pray when we're in a difficult situation, but God also wants us to act. Pick up the phone. Enlist the help of family or friends. ~~the~~ Learn some new skills. Don't sit there passively & expect someone else to rescue you.

Jesus says something interesting at the end of this little parable. "The people of this world are more shrewd in dealing - their own kind than are the people of light." Jesus understood how the real world operates. He knew that sometimes even scoundrels are successful, not because they are smarter or more talented, but because they seize opportunities. They are not held back by their fears. They are not held back by their doubts. They have learned to be self-reliant and self-motivated.

There are a couple of phrases we don't hear much any more: "He worked like the dickens, as he worked like the devil to get it done." The implication is that the devil is always busy seeking to achieve his wicked ways. Satan never misses an opportunity to tempt, discourage

or embitter. Well, there's a lot of truth in that. I guarantee that if you hit a rough patch in life & you sit around feeling sorry for yourself, the tempter will move in quickly & work like the deckless to cause you to quit trying.

Jesus praised the dishonest steward because he didn't give in to his fears. He reached out & made friends who would help him when he was out on the street. Jesus obviously wouldn't approve of his methods — but that's another parable. What he did approve of was this man's resolve. He was in a predicament & he took action. And that's what Jesus wants us to do. Don't get discouraged. Don't sit around feeling sorry for yourself. Pray — of course — in all circumstances, but if there is something you can do, do it, & God will bless your effort.

There's a story of a man shipwrecked on a lonely island. To his surprise he found he was not alone. There was a large tribe on the island. Amazingly they welcomed him warmly & treated him very well. In fact, they made him their king.

He was delighted & puzzled. Why were they treating him so well?

As he learned their language, he found out that it was their custom to choose a king for a year. But when the year was over, they took him to a certain island & abandoned him, the man's delight turned into distress.

Then he hit on a shrewd plan. He was king. He could order people to do anything he wanted. So, over the next few months he sent tribe members over to the other island to clear space, build a comfortable house, and plant crops. He then sent over some chosen friends to live there & wait for him. When his time of reigning was over, he was put in a place carefully prepared, full of friends delighted to receive him.

It's not scripture that God helps those who help themselves. That's Ben Franklin in Poor Richard's Almanac in 1757.

God does help us, but God will not do for us what we can do for ourselves. If God constantly worked to solve all our problems, we would remain forever emotionally & spiritually immature.

Got a problem. Here's Jesus' answer: Pray & work. God wants us to pray but God also likes people of action. Pray & work. Don't attempt one & the other. Amen.

The first thing I noticed when I stepped
 out of the car was the smell of
 the sea. It was a salty, fresh
 smell that I had never before.
 The sun was shining brightly, and
 the water was a deep blue. I
 felt a sense of freedom and
 adventure. I had come to the
 beach, and I was here to stay.

Pentecost 15 (act.)
10/3/10 Pensacola

The Cost of Discipleship Luke 14: 25-35

Failing to plan, an old saying goes, is planning to fail. I turned 81 last June, and I never planned to be 81. If I had, I think I would have done something that has a better pension plan than being the pastor of a small church.

There are a lot of reasons people refuse to plan. One is a feeling of helplessness. You've probably heard the cry of despair that goes like this: "If you want to make God laugh, show God your calendar." That means you make plans & then - out of the blue something happens - you have HIV or breast cancer, you lose your job, your partner comes home & says she's gotten a job transfer to Detroit, and all your well ~~made~~ ^{made} plans are knocked askew. It happens to all of us.

It's like the story of two explorers who were on a jungle safari when suddenly a ferocious lion jumped in front of them.

"Keep calm" the first explorer whispered.
"Remember what we read in the guide book?
If you stand perfectly still + look the lion in the eye, it will turn + run."
"Sure" replied his companion, "you've read the book + I've read the book, but has the lion read the book."

Life has a way of knocking us off course. But, it still keeps to read the book.

After giving his listeners some harsh + hard challenges regarding discipleship, Jesus says, "Let anyone's ears to hear, listen." In the Hebrew tradition to hear + listen means to put something into action. Jesus, who was a Jew, challenged his hearers to make their faith active.

Jesus calls his hearers to count the cost of discipleship. He uses three illustrations "hating family," building a tower or mounting an army. When Jesus talks, he's not asking his listeners to agree to him, he expects them to put them into action. There's where Jesus calls us to a revolution.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He would be crucified. Crowds were gathering thinking that he would establish a worldly empire of power & glory that would take on the Romans and heal them. They weren't interested in following him to his death.

There are many of us who pray, "your dominion/kingdom come", but we don't want to think about what that entails. All around us are churches that talk about individual salvation, but for them it doesn't mean a lot. It's the kid in the ghetto, or the person who's lost their job, the gay man or woman you meet at the bar whose spent most of their non-working hours drinking & cruising & when you say to them "Christianity ^{to you} means you're going to turn your life around and go a whole different ^{direction} ~~way~~ - that person sees that ~~there~~ ^{there} is a cost of discipleship. Jesus was separating admirers from disciples.

Jesus was a Jew. If you don't enter into a Hebrew way of thinking, it's hard to understand what Jesus means by "hating" your family. In Hebrew, there is often exaggeration for emphasis.

I once fell afoul of this. I was a teacher in U.S. right after the schools were desegregated. A group of us temporary teachers were employed to desegregate schools of the opposite race. 8 of us were hired to teach in the Desire Housing Project, one of the roughest areas in U.S. We were put in the 4th + 5th grades, because the next year the kids would go to integrated middle schools where for the first time they would be mixed in a middle class white kids + our job was to get them ready for more rigorous demands. The federal govt. had sent in special textbooks which were high interest, low vocabulary books that older children who had difficulty reading would enjoy, rather than having to read the Dick + Jane low vocabulary books. These books

were about race cars + sports + the boys who didn't read well enjoyed them. There was only one problem. They were locked up in a closet, presided over by a man who was a federal employee - who wouldn't let us have the books because they were intended only for the federal reading program. I remember saying to my lover who taught 4th that ~~if~~ someday I wished I could meet him in a dark alley. He overheard it + took it to the principal. I had to explain that it was hyperbole, exaggeration for emphasis. My principal had asked for us to be there + she got me the books.

Jesus was looking for disciples not admirers. He had things to accomplish + not much time left in which to do it.

The NT is written in GK, but the thought patterns are Hebrew. Consider Jesus story of a man $\bar{c}$ a tree growing out of his eye looking for a

speck in his sibling's eye. Jesus ~~can~~^{could} have said "Don't be so judgmental," but he used an exaggerated picture to get his point across.

The original GK word here is miseo. Actually it means to regard $\bar{c}$ less affection, to love less. It doesn't mean what our word "hate" means, to regard $\bar{c}$ animosity, ill will or revenge. Miseo doesn't mean that the object is detestable. Having miseo toward someone doesn't mean the person is an abomination (and we've all had experience $\bar{c}$ that word). It just means that by comparison someone or something is less important than someone or something else. Jesus is saying that the cost of discipleship is to love God more than anything else - even family or self.

Jesus refers to the first commandment "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other Gods before me." To love God is the highest priority in life. Placing anything other than God in first place results in disaster. People die.

Only God is forever. If God ~~is~~^{is} in first place, we will grieve, but grief will not hold us forever. It's one reason God needs to be in first place in our lives.

The second & third things Jesus talks about are ^{an} incomplete tower or an inadequate army. An incomplete tower is a commentary on poor planning. You don't set out to build a new church without planning its foundations or whether you can afford to complete it. Planning $\bar{=}$ action results in frustration, but action $\bar{=}$ planning results in mis-directed energy & failure.

With Roman soldiers all around him & even some listening to him, Jesus drew on analogy from the military. Soren Kierkegaard once said that many Christians wear the uniform but few are willing to go into battle. We can't sit on the promises & not live on the ~~promises~~^{promises}.

One Easter, during the communion

domination in Russia, a Communist leader made a scathing speech to a large crowd against God & faith. He ended up saying, "Can anyone here answer me?" There was an awkward silence. The consequences of standing up to the Communist leader were apparent to all. A young Orthodox priest rose & mounted the platform.

"I'll give you just five minutes to answer my speech" said the Communist.

"I don't need 5 minutes, just 5 ^{seconds} ~~seconds~~" said the priest. He turned to the crowd & in a loud voice said, "Christ is risen." With one voice, the crowd responded "Christ is risen, indeed." That was doing battle for X in a war zone.

Being a disciple of X means counting the cost of discipleship. For us a gay X'tian, it means living what we believe even when others question why.

When I first came into UCC, many of my feminist friends questioned why I insisted on belonging to a faith that denigrated women.

I remembered Peter's words,
"Where would I go? You have the words
of eternal life." Sometimes you
just have to state what you
believe in the face of people who
scoff at your faith and I'm sure
many of us have been there.

The poet, Carol Kimmner, was concerned
about Christians who were devout but
held a self-righteous, judgmental
faith, because she felt strongly
that their judgmentalism was
keeping out people who needed Christ's
leading in their lives. So she wrote
a poem about it. It's called, "When
I say that I'm a Christian."

When I say that I'm a Christian, I'm
not shouting "I've been saved." I'm
whispering "I got lost!" That's why
I chose this way.

When I say "I'm a Christian," I don't
speak in human pride. I'm confessing
that I stumble, needing God to be my
guide.

When I say "I'm a X'tian", I'm not trying to be strong, I'm professing that I'm weak + pray for strength to carry on.

When I say "I'm a X'tian", I'm not bragging of success. I'm admitting that I've failed + cannot ever pay the debt.

When I say, "I'm a X'tian" I'm not claiming to be perfect. My flaws are far too visible, but God believes I'm worth it.

When I say, "I'm a X'tian" I still feel the sting of pain. I have my share of heartache which is why I seek X's name.

When I say "I'm a X'tian", I do not wish to judge. I have no authority. I only know I'm loved.

Being a X'tian doesn't mean we're ^{better} ~~re~~ than everyone else, it means we're

counted the cost, we've read the book, & we know what's expected of us.

It's amazing what God can do with us if we simply count the cost and see what we are able to do & then do it. We are not helpless, we are not incapable. We just have to plan & be there. Paul put it this way: "I can do all things thru X, who strengthens me,"
Amen.

counted the cost, we've been the
back, & we know what's expected
of us.

It's impossible when they come with
one of our things, because the cost
and we say what we are able to do
+ then to it. We are not happy,
we are not unhappy, but with
one to follow & the others, there
you is the way. "I would tell
them that I will stay there now."
Gloria.

More!

Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15; Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

You may have heard about the young woman about to get married who said to her mother, "I can't marry him. He's an atheist and doesn't believe ~~in~~ there is a hell."

Her mother responded, "That's all right, dear. Marry him, & between the two of us I'm sure we can convince him."

In today's reading from Luke, Dives goes to hell. He goes to hell because he has no compassion. He even wants to be waited on in hell. I think his problem is that he feels entitled. Harvard psychiatrist Robert Cole cites this as a characteristic found among children of the very rich. Most kids, when you ask them what they want to be when they grow up answer "I want to be a doctor" (teacher, lawyer) or "I'd like to be a firefighter." When you ask ~~the~~

really rich kids, they answer, "I'm going to be a doctor." The implication is "Whatever I want, I'm going to get it," along with a sense that everything is possible for them, may go the feeling that they are entitled to take credit for things they get only because of their money + connections. It reminds me of that devastating barack Obama Richards hurled at George Bush, "He was born on third base + thinks he hit a triple."

The real trouble is that most of us think we're entitled to "More". We want more - more fun, more money, more excitement, more sex, more love, even the church wants more programs, more members, more, more, more. More is the way we think of success. And we're running out of more.

The difference between Dives - the rich man (which is what Dives means) and Lazarus, was appalling. In America, for a long time, we had a very few very rich people and a certain number of poor

people, but most of us considered ourselves "middle class." But things are becoming different. We always thought of America as a class-less society, but we're increasingly becoming a caste society. Someone called it a "two coupon society." with severe separation of the two coupon clippers. 50 million people the top 10-20% clip stock coupons + treasury certificates. Their kids go to private schools (many of them Christian academies) while the public schools are deteriorating. Their mail goes FedEx while the postal service is planning to go to 5 deliveries a week. When I was a kid, we got morning + afternoon deliveries + one delivery on Saturday. The rich get 5 gallon jugs of bottled water delivered to the door while we worry that our water + sewer bills are going sky-high + we're going to have to time our showers so we can afford water.

Back to the coupon cutters, the poorest

get food stamps while the rest of us take the Sunday paper to get the food coupons to save \$5-10 a week on our groceries. Someone once said there was a "fortunate fifth + a forgotten 4/5ths."

The upper fifth has receded from the US + belongs to a borderless world, ~~where~~ where the lower 5th have also receded but this time from the mainstream by breaking laws, dropping out of school and declining to work.

Like the Rich man + Lazarus, these two groups are separated by a chasm pre-determined by their economic status. Jesus told the parable to scandalize the Pharisees, forcing them to realize the essential injustice of such an economic system.

The author of the book of James says that "religion that is pure + undefiled before God is this: to care for widows + orphans in their distress + to keep oneself unstained by the world." Jesus hit the streets, healed the sick, gave sight

to the blind + told the people to go back + tell what they had seen —

"the poor have good news brought to them."

Jesus told a story - a parable. "There was a certain rich man who was splendidly clothed + lived each day in mirth + luxury." One day, Lazarus, a diseased beggar, was laid at the rich man's door. As Lazarus lay there longing for scraps from the rich man's table, the dogs would come + lick his open sores. Finally, Lazarus died + was carried to the angels to be in Abraham in the place of the righteous dead. The rich man also died + was buried + his soul went to hell. There in torment, the rich man saw Lazarus in the far distance in Abraham.

"Then Abraham have pity. Send Lazarus over here to dip the tip of his finger in water + cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in these flames." But Abraham said to him, "Son, remember that during your lifetime you had everything you wanted + Lazarus had nothing."

So now he is here being comforted + you are in anguish. And besides, there is a great charm separating us + anyone wanting to come to you is stopped at the edge, + no one over there can cross to us."

How we treat the poor + homeless is God's primary evidence of our faith. I think most of us think of ourselves as middle class. We're fooling ourselves. We believe that the distance, the dispositions + the distributions between ourselves + "the poor" are very significant. The increasing wealth + power of the tiny majority of the colossal rich stands as impressive testimony to that group's ability to grasp "more." The problem is that when there isn't any "more" to gather in, "more" must be found somewhere. This "more" comes from the middle class, which is not so much shrinking as it is being sucked dry by the appetites of the upper echelons + the needs of the lower echelons.

To make "more" jobs are increasingly sent overseas and the middle class

becomes the working poor. And what happens is that the upper echelons want lower taxes + the lower classes strike back = rising rates of crime.

Back to the parable: The rich man thinks if he wants something, Lazarus ought to fetch it for him. "Father Abraham," the rich man shouted "have some pity! Send Lazarus over here to dip the tip of his finger in water + cool my tongue." "O father Abraham, send Lazarus to my father's home." What arrogance! The rich man, thinks that even in hell he's entitled to have someone serve him.

Let's use the parable to set the record right. What are we entitled to? The scripture is very plain - but we may be surprised.

First of all - we are entitled to reap what we sow. If we sow good things we reap good things. If we sow spiritual things we ~~we~~ reap spiritual things.

Rich Petino of the Boston Celtics says that hard work is the basic building block of every kind of achievement.

If it, everything else is pointless. You can start with a dream or an ideal or a goal, but before any of your hopes can be realized, you must truly deserve your success... but from the Sistine Chapel to the transcontinental RR to the space shuttle there's no mystery how these things were accomplished. They were created by people who worked hard over a long period of time.

Second, we are entitled to eternal life. What more can we ask for? We deserve to reap what we sow, & we deserve to live forever. Notice I didn't say we deserve to live abundantly & have more in the world to come. We are simply promised that life goes on beyond the grave. That's the testimony of the NT. Whether that's good news or not depends. It was good news for Lazarus & not such good news for Dives.

Do I believe in a literal heaven & hell. I believe that we will be with God or without God. The story of Lazarus & the rich man is

a parable and parables matter in the single point they are making.

Heaven + hell are peripherals to Jesus' point. We are entitled to live forever. How we prepare for life in whether it is tomorrow or our old age, or life in the hereafter is between you + God. We are going to ~~see~~ reap what we sow.

We are also entitled to start over. That's the biblical good news. We are entitled to begin again. Would you want to reap everything that you sow? Do you remember the old adage about the person who sows wild oats + prays for a crop failure? We don't want to reap everything we sow. We sometimes do stupid things. We act impulsively. We ~~leap~~ leap before we look, talk before we think, give in to the worst that is in us, rather than our best. At such times we would like to suspend the law of sowing + reaping, that's what grace is all about.

loose is that sometimes we don't sow seeds of compassion, seeds of kindness, seeds of love, seeds that will live on after we're gone.

At any point in his life, the rich man could have changed his priorities. At any point he could have taken his eyes off his money & let them fall on the poor man at his door. But he waited too late. Even in the afterlife he didn't see Lazarus as a fellow child of God, but only as a servant, a convenience, an object. This is insensitivity at its worst, but it came out of a lifetime of spiritual neglect.

~~At any point in his life~~, Everyone is entitled to chance to start over, but it is possible to wait until it's too late. Life habits can grow so strong that they are like chains on our souls.

Are we neglecting someone? Are we insensitive to a need? It doesn't need to be a beggar on the street. It could be someone in our own families, a neighbor, a coworker, even your partner.

We're entitled to reap what we sow. We're entitled to eternal life & we're entitled

to start over. Let's start by thinking
what it means when we ask for
more.

Amen.

for these ones, let's start by thinking
about it from when we are for

now.

Vacation 20, 21,
Sundays in Pentecost

22nd Pentecost
10/24/10

The Good, The Bad + The Justified
Joel 2:23-32, Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

One afternoon a workman had just finished laying a carpet for a woman. He stepped out for a smoke, only to realize he had lost his cigarettes. After looking around he noticed that in the middle of the room, under the carpet that he had just installed was a bump. Oh, he thought, my cigarettes. "No sense pulling up the entire floor for one pack of cigarettes," he said to himself. So he got out a mallet + flattened the bump. Not long after, as he was cleaning up, the woman came in. "Here," she said, handing him his pack of cigarettes. "I found them in the hallway." Then she said, "Now if I ~~if~~ could just find my pet parakeet."

It was an honest mistake, and the workman didn't know he was doing any harm getting rid of the bump in the carpet. Sometimes we aren't aware that our little mishaps may cause harm to someone else.

Better to be honest, rather than hide our mistakes.

the famous actor, Gregory Peck, was once standing in line $\bar{c}$ a friend, waiting for a table in a crowded restaurant. They had been waiting some time. The diners seemed to be taking their time eating, and new tables weren't opening up very fast. Peck's friend became impatient, $\bar{+}$ he said to Gregory Peck, "Why don't you tell the maitre d' who you are?" Peck responded $\bar{c}$ great wisdom, "If you have to tell them who you are, then you aren't."

That's a lesson the Pharisee in today's gospel reading apparently hadn't learned. His prayer, if it can be called that, is largely an advertisement for himself. He's selling himself to God. It's little wonder that Luke describes him in the way he does. "The Pharisee stood $\bar{+}$ prayed thus with himself." Pretty apt — he prayed $\bar{c}$ himself. He'd have done better if he'd had Gregory Peck there to whisper in his ear that if he had to remind God who he was, then he wasn't.

The tax collector, on the other hand, didn't have to tell God who he was. He knew who he was & he knew God knew who he was. His prayer is not an exercise in self-promotion, but a confession & a plea for mercy. He's not selling himself, but opening himself. And Jesus says, "It is this man who went home justified." The word "justified" means to be declared "not guilty." It means to be declared right $\bar{c}$ God. The tax collector is declared to be in a right relationship $\bar{c}$ God, while the Pharisee, who is so certain of his own righteousness, is shown to be in a wrong relationship $\bar{c}$ God. He is not justified before the bar of God's justice.

Now, this doesn't mean the Pharisee was a bad person & the tax collector was really a good person. There's no suggestion of that in the parable, the Pharisee was probably every bit as good, moral & generous as he claimed to be. When he gives his little speech about

Now he fasts & tithes, gives alms & prays frequently, he's not guilty of false advertising. There's no suggestion that he's a hypocrite — pretending to be something he isn't. In fact, as a Pharisee, he enjoyed great respect among his people because of the high standards of morality, ethics & piety. Nor is there any suggestion that the tax collector is really a good guy at heart.

The tax collector was probably every bit as bad as his reputation made him out to be. If he hadn't been a crook, he probably wouldn't have been a tax collector to begin with. The Romans couldn't get good people to be tax collectors. The only people who wanted to collect taxes were those interested in getting rich at the expense of others.

The contrast isn't between the real, but hidden, goodness of the tax collector & the real, but hidden hypocrisy of the Pharisee. Jesus is more radical than that & the gospel is more radical than that. It goes to the very root of the problem of human error & alienation from God. You've often heard me say that God ~~accepts~~^{knows} us as we are, God accepts us as we are, but God never leaves us as we are.

that's the point of this parable.

First, although we may not live in awareness of it all the time, God knows who we are. We don't have to — and we can't — do a snow job on God + sell ourselves to God. It's like Santa Claus. "He knows when you've been bad or good." But God's knowledge of us goes much deeper than that. God not only knows our actions, but knows our motives, our intentions, our deepest + most intimate secrets + even knows what it is in the depths of our unconscious minds.

The trouble with that is that most of us operate on the "God rewards the good + punishes the bad." So, if that's the way things work, we're all in trouble. We have things inside us we wouldn't want anyone else to know, there are parts of us too private, too painful, too intimate to share c anyone else. So if our acceptance by God depends on God not knowing who we really are, then we're lost, that's why it's good news that God knows exactly who we are.

We don't have to pretend. We don't have to close off parts of our lives to God. We don't have to be afraid of God finding out something we're ashamed of. God knows us with a knowledge that is deep + wonderful + intimate + infinite. Paul puts it this way, "One day I shall know as I am fully known." God already knows more about us than we will ever know until we meet God in heaven.

Close on that comes the next part. God not only knows who we are, but God accepts us as we are. This is radical because it goes against the grain of the way most of us think. If something good happens to us we say, "Well, we must be living right," meaning that our goodness has been rewarded. When something bad happens to us, we begin to wonder what we've done wrong + why we are being punished. It's pretty normal for us to think God blesses those who are good + punishes those who are bad. That's the way we humans would do it if we were God + we project our own ideas of justice, reward + punishment on God. The only problem is that that's not who God is.

Karl Barth, the theologian, used to say, "God is God." God is not an idol created in OUR image, God is God. God acts as God acts. And Jesus says in this parable that God is a God who justifies the ungodly. He declares sinners to be in a right relationship. God declares them not guilty. Why? Because they are ungodly? No. God doesn't approve of ungodliness, but justifies them because of their trust in God, & that's the right & righteous thing to do. We throw ourselves on the mercy of God & God declares us righteous when we do so. That's the meaning of having faith; believing that God will act like God & have mercy on us, the problem is that we don't act like God & we're amazed when God acts like God.

Sam'l Colgate, the founder of the Colgate soap & toothpaste empire was a devout Christian. He told of an incident that happened in his church. During a revival, an invitation was given at the close of the service for all who wished to turn their lives over to X & be forgiven to come forward. One of the first people to walk forward was a well-known prostitute;

She knelt in very real repentance, cried + asked God to forgive her. Meanwhile the rest of the congregation looked on approvingly at what she was doing. Then she stood + testified that she believed God had forgiven her + she now wanted to become a member of the church. For a few moments the silence was deafening. Finally, Colgate arose + said, "I guess we blundered when we prayed that God would save sinners. We forgot to specify what kind of sinners. We'd better ask him to forgive us for this oversight. The HS has touched this woman + made her truly repentant, but God apparently doesn't understand that she's not the type we want to rescue. We'd better spell it out for him just which sinners we had in mind."

Immediately a motion was made + unanimously approved that the woman be accepted into membership.

God accepts us as we are. What cuts us off from God's forgiveness + the freedom forgiveness brings to us is our thinking we have to justify ourselves. ^{TRUSTING} ~~TRUSTING~~ in our own righteousness doesn't bring God's justification. Trusting in God's love does. God knows who we are. God accepts us

as we are, but God doesn't leave us where we are.

Justification is the biblical word for God forgiving + claiming us. Sanctification is the word for God cleaning + changing our hearts. God doesn't just want to rescue humanity from hell, God wants to get us ready for heaven. Paul says "God is in the business of making us holy - "to grow up in every way into X who is our head". What sanctification really means is spiritual adulthood, maturity in X, perfection in love.

This work of God's Spirit within us doesn't turn us into stained-glass saints, people who walk around piously in folded hands, praying all day. God's work within us is practical. When we open our lives to God, when we no longer trust our own morality, good behavior or will-power, amazing things begin to happen. As we accept & experience God's love for us, we find ourselves becoming more loving to others. People with bad tempers find they can control

their tempers because of God's spirit within them. Those of us in substance abuse problems find a resource & a strength that is beyond ~~ourselves~~ ^{ours} and begin to control our cravings. People in too great a love of money & material things find that their values change. People in deep insecurities & low self-esteem begin to see themselves & love themselves as God loves them & sees them.

Spiritual maturity is a life-long process. It's a journey. We don't become saints overnight, but we do become. That's the nature of the Xian life; becoming, conformed to the image of X. The single identifying mark of the HS's work in our lives is love. Do we love God & do we love one another? Do we love ourselves enough to let God work on us?

What's most important to you? Do you need to accept the God loves you? Do you need to know God accepts you where you are? Do you need to grow in X and give God the freedom to cleanse away all that is incompatible with the love of X? These are all stages on the journey. We do not make ourselves holy. It is God who makes us

like X. We only have to trust God that it is possible for us to be as loving as X is - to accept ourselves & others and to grow in X. It's a matter of faith, a matter of trust, we will not have better morals or ethics or more wellpower when we decide to. We will have them when we allow God to love us into conformity $\bar{c}$ the nature of X. When X is formed in us, we will be better people. It's all a product of faith. From the beginning to the end, we are saved by God's grace.

Open yourself to God's spirit as fully as you are consciously ~~able~~ capable of doing; Give God the freedom to

cleanse away everything that is incompatible $\bar{c}$ the love of X, accept God's love & you will be amazed at the difference God makes. X

promises it. God loves you as you are, God accepts you as you are & God doesn't want to leave you where you are. Amen.

23rd After Pentecost

10/31/10

The Parable of the Frog Prince (3)

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 Luke 19:1-10

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Do you remember from your childhood the fairy tale about the wicked witch who turned the handsome prince into a green, slimy, warty frog sitting on a lily pad? "You will only be restored when a beautiful princess comes along and kisses you on the lips," she cackled.

Well, the lily pond was on the grounds of the palace of a lovely princess. She began to notice the frog sitting there, croaking his "ribbits" at her every morning. She began to be fond of him. One morning she came out and the frog wasn't in his usual place. She noticed that an old angry swan had the frog in his beak. Impulsively, she ran over, grabbed the swan's beak & freed the frog. Without thinking, she raised the frog to her lips & kissed it. Immediately it turned back into the handsome prince.

The princess had seen beyond all the ugliness & saw the frog's real need. Slowly all the ugliness fell away until the handsome prince was revealed.

That's what Jesus does for us. Jesus snatches us out of the very jaws of the devil & kisses us to wholeness.

It's what Jesus did for Zacchaeus & for us.

We owe Luke a great debt. For in his Gospel alone is told the dramatic story that encapsulates for us what the mission of Jesus was all about, & in turn what the mission of the church is all about. The event happened while Jesus was passing thru Jericho, the city of palms. Luke writes: "And there was a man named Zachaeus; he was a chief tax collector & he was rich." In one sentence, we are told the story of a human life. Nothing in 1st C. Judea was quite so hated and despised as the Roman tax. It not only reminded the Jews that they were a subjugated people, it also represented a theological affront. To the Jews there was only one King,

and that was God, not Caesar. Paying tribute to an earthly, non Jewish monarch was something the Hebrews had opposed throughout their long history.

But there was more. As we've said, the dirty work of collecting the tax wasn't done by the Romans, but by collaborating Jews. To make matters worse, ^{some of} the money they collected from their fellow countryfolk stuck to their own fingers. We are told that Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector. It is the only time in the NT that that term is used. It means he was over an entire district. Zacchaeus may have been short, but he had wealth + power - so, in a manner of speaking, people looked up to him. Zacchaeus was a little man c a big reputation. He wasn't just well-to-do. He was rich. But in many ways, Zacchaeus was as poor as anyone in Jericho. For all his money, he was a lonely man, an empty man. In the world of the flesh, he had everything.

In the world of the spirit he had nothing. Zacchaeus had lost his self-respect, his dignity, his reverence, his character, his conscience, his conviction and all his friends. His story reminds us that anyone can stand in danger of losing it all. Our bigger problem as humans, is that when we lose our relationship $\bar{c}$ God, our relationships $\bar{c}$ everything else can go wrong, and we can be restored only when we reestablish our relationship $\bar{c}$ God.

For this reason, Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. It wasn't the excitement & thrill of a parade that captured his imagination. In fact, a large crowd of his countrymen filled $\bar{c}$ religious & nationalistic ~~for~~ fervor was precisely not the place for him to be. He could easily have become the focus of a mob scene.

On the pulpit of the old MCC on 4th Avenue when I first came to B'ham was a small brass plate. I had printed on it a quotation that said "Sir, we would see Jesus."

That's why Zacchaeus found himself up a tree. He wanted to see Jesus, but he was too small.

We are told that being tall gives you an advantage in our culture. For example, tall men make more money than short ones. If you are 6'3" or taller you're likely to start a new job at a salary 12.4 percent higher than someone under 6ft. It doesn't make sense & it isn't fair, but it's the way it is. Each extra inch of height is worth \$600 a year. The only trouble is that if you are overweight it cancels it out. Those who are 30% overweight earn \$4,000 less than someone who is thin.

Here's an example. 18 Presidents of the US have been 6' or taller. This is extraordinary because average heights were lower in the 18th & 19th C. Lincoln was 6'4". Jefferson was 6'3" at a time when the average man was 5'4".

Why would this make a difference?

It doesn't, but it does. Look at Bill Clinton & Barack Obama - tall.

Zacchaeus was one of the most famous short men in history. Why? Because one day Jesus was passing thru Jericho and ~~for~~ Zacchaeus climbed a tree so he could get a better view of the man he had heard so much about. It seems there is an ancient sycamore tree still standing in Jericho surrounded by a fence & reputed to be the very tree from which Jesus called Zacchaeus. Tour buses stop there for people to be photographed beneath it.

When Jesus reached the sycamore tree, he looked up & said, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today. Zacchaeus came down & the rest is history.

Zacchaeus' name meant "pure one" & "righteous". He had turned his name into a joke. But this was the man Jesus went home with. It's almost like Jesus enjoyed stirring up the crowd. He was dining w/ the most hated man in town; a man who was vile, corrupt & regarded as an enemy agent.

Jesus was controversial. Understand this: grace is always controversial when it is lived out. When Tray Perry first extended grace to the gay community, people were ready to jail him, ready to raid our churches. People burned down our churches in the early days of the Fellowship. We sing a great gusto "Amazing grace how sweet the sound..." but even we are ready to join the lynch party if grace is extended to the people we don't approve of. The crowd muttered when Jesus went home to Zacchaeus.

Mesakwile, at the meal, something extraordinary was happening. Zacchaeus climbed to his feet & made an astounding announcement. "Look, lord. Here + now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I ~~have~~ ^{have} cheated anybody of anything I will pay back four times the amount."

This encounter had given this little man a big heart. He went far beyond what the law demanded. The OT law is clear.

If you are repaying stolen property, you pay what you stole plus 20%. This was considered adequate restitution by the law. Only in violent & destructive acts of robbery was a four-fold restitution necessary. And then for Zacchaeus to give one-half of everything he had to the poor was icing on the cake. This was a dramatic act of repentance.

Then Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today, salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek & save that which was lost."

That is what grace looks like. There is no greater picture of what grace looks like than the story of Zacchaeus. Rev. Angela Asken puts it this way: "What Jesus showed to a chief tax collector in Jericho is that God accepts & transforms the ~~un~~ unacceptable, loves the unlovable, forgives the unforgivable. In Jesus' death, God voluntarily takes on all the damage of sin, so that we can all respond to God's love freely & abundantly. Zacchaeus was saved by grace & invited to faith & so are we all."

All of us can be recipients of God's grace. Clement of Alexandria wrote in the first century after X, that Zacchaeus' life being a tax collector & later became bishop of Caesarea. We're not certain that's true. It's an ancient legend. But it may be true. We know that something dramatic happened in the chief tax collector's life, this man who had lived only for himself and what he could acquire reached out in restitution to those he had cheated & he shared half of what he had left w/ the poor. If it could happen to a man as sleazy as Zacchaeus, it could happen to us.

The GLBT community is often cast as outsiders in our own cities & towns. Like Zacchaeus, what we have to offer is overlooked or rejected because of who we are. However, like Zacchaeus we must not be afraid to seek Jesus outside the traditional social structures & assemblies we may not be people of power like Zacchaeus.

but we can duplicate his earnestness
to see + hear from God thru our willingness
to go beyond what is expected of us.

~~Tuesday~~ Tuesday is election day. We
can seek alliances with those who pursue
justice + those who are concerned about
the care of those who have little. The
~~LBGT~~ LGBT + all persecuted groups
because of race, gender, social status +
class ~~it~~ can choose to pursue a
vision of life + justice. Like Zacchaeus,
we must decide that we no longer
care about what people think + follow
our God anyway. We won't get everything
we want right away, but we must continue
working toward it. Thru our determination
+ faith in what is right + just we can
continue to shine a light on discrimination
+ prejudice. We can be a beacon of
hope towards a more just future.

We've been kissed by Jesus, the princes,
+ we're no longer frogs, but whole +
handsome princes (or princesses) +
we need to share our good fortune.
Amen

24th after Pentecost
11/7/10

Jesus the Politician
Haggai 1:15b-2:9, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5
Luke 20:1-5, 13-17

A little girl walked into a pet shop. She went up to the shopkeeper + asked with a sweet little lisp: "Excuse me, mister, do you have any little rabbits?" The shopkeeper bent down so he would be on her level and asked, "Do you want a little white rabbit or a little brown rabbit? Or maybe that cute little brown rabbit?" The little girl thought for a moment, leaned forward and looked the storekeeper right in the eyes + said, "Mister, I don't think my python really cares."

The lesson this morning is about life's universals. And like the python it doesn't matter whether we're white, black, brown; rich or poor; saints or sinners. The mortality rate is 100%. Everybody has to die of something.

It was Passover and thousands of religious pilgrims are in Jerusalem to participate in the religious celebration.

On Monday, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Later, he had driven the money changers from the temple. Now, he was at Caiaphas' palace, meeting with the political elite of Jerusalem.

Gathered around the table that evening was one of the strangest combinations of political + religious factions anyone could possibly imagine. Politics, it is said, makes strange bedfellows. It is interesting how fundamentalist Protestants who are against liturgical worship can find a partner in the Catholic Church on the issue of abortion. It's also interesting how fundamentalist Protestants who don't believe Jews are going to heaven, suddenly have friends among those very Jews because they have similar views on the protection of Israel. Something a little like that happened one night in Jerusalem. Here's the background:

Three groups conspired together that evening: The Herodians, the Sadducees + the Pharisees. What was strange about that? The Herodians were opposed to the present

Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. They wanted a restoration of the throne of Herod under one of Herod's sons. The Sadducees were the conservatives. They were the aristocratic + priestly class.

They did not believe there was ~~an~~ life after death. They did not believe in heaven.

The Pharisees were the liberals. They did believe in a life after death. There is

a heaven, for them. The 3 groups were typical of what was happening in the

land. The Jews were a divided people.

Some believed in appeasing the Romans, some in coexistence, some in silence,

some like some of Jesus' disciples were Zealots, who believed in outright armed rebellion. There was one thing

they all held in common: They hated + despised Pontius Pilate + if they lead their brethren they would all want to be out from under the rule of Rome.

Therefore, the Jewish leaders viewed Jesus in terms of his stance on the Roman issue. They knew what Jesus had been saying: "Go the second mile."

do I pray for our military? Yes. But I also pray for our enemies + I pray for peace. Jesus understood that it was a delicate balance - God + the state. At times we have a duty to Rome. At times we have a duty to God. Do you tithe to the church or pay your taxes? Try to make that argument $\bar{c}$ the IRS + you won't be around long or have the money to pay your tithe.

Next in the crowd were the Sadducees. They were the ones who did not believe in the resurrection. Their question dealt $\bar{c}$ the afterlife. They asked Jesus about a woman who was widowed seven times in succession. In heaven, whose wife will she be? To them this was the question which pointed out the total absurdity of the thought of an afterlife. Jesus answered: In the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage. Jesus is saying that heaven is another dimension. It will not be there like it is here. Jesus shows that they have a faulty premise. Unlike his first answer, this one is very direct. Then he answers the real question: God is the God of the living and not the dead.

You are concerned $\bar{c}$ the afterlife + the problem is that you haven't learned to live life here + now. Heaven is not our responsibility. That is God's responsibility. Our responsibility is ~~to live~~ how we live life here + now. Jesus had beaten the Sadducees.

The third question came from the Pharisees. They were the guardians of the Torah + their question dealt $\bar{c}$ the law + ~~the~~ ^{their} relationship to the law. "Master", they asked, "what is the greatest commandment. The pitfall was obvious. To emphasize any one law could be construed that he was de-emphasizing all the other laws. Again, Jesus outwits them. He quotes from the daily prayer of all Jews ~~from~~ the Shema Yisrael. "You should love the Lord your God $\bar{c}$ all your heart + soul + mind + strength. And the second is like the first, "You should love your neighbor as you love yourself." To that, implied Jesus, and you can toss away 635 scribal laws + your religious lawyers will be out of a job, too.

Having routed the opposition, Jesus says "Now it's my turn. Now I want to ask you a question.

What do you think of the Messiah, the X? We're still asking that question. What do we think of the X? All their questions were human questions. Jesus questions were about God.

In the life of faith, God is the main thing: to maintain + nurture our rootedness in God, to embrace life in the DofG, a life of compassion + grace, of peace + self-giving love, of servanthood + hope. When Jesus speaks of the God of the living, he wants his questioners to expand their vision. Jesus is saying to them, "Your questions betray your limited point of view, your narrow frame of reference. The world to come is a whole new world, a world as God intended it to be. It's a world in which each of us live as a child of the resurrection, a child of God."

A story is told of a preacher attempting to put the finishing touches on the Sunday sermon, but who was constantly being interrupted by his 6yo daughter. To occupy her, he found a picture of a globe + he cut it up in little pieces, knowing

that it would keep her busy for a long time. To his surprise within minutes she had completed it. Asked how she did it so fast, she replied, "Simple. There was a picture of a man on the back, so I simply put his face together & the world fell right in line. That is what Jesus is saying to us & to his questioners in the last week of his life. What do you think of the X? Put that picture together & the rest of your world ~~will~~ will fall right in line.

Amen

then it moved to up her head for a
long time. To his surprise, within
minutes the bird completed a circle
and she did it all over, she kept it
"right". There was a repetition of a word
on the back, as I heard him say
"together" - the word "together" in
this case was in response to what
he had just said in the last round of
the X's. I think he was thinking of
the picture together & the word of
"together" with him for right in time.

Answer

25th after Pentecost
11/14/10

Good News About Hair

Isaiah 65: 17-21, 2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13

Luke 21: 5-19

The other day I noticed that Miley was beginning to show some grey hairs. I guess we're all getting older. Steve has some grey hair in his beard, Jimmy is getting bald - which may be from Chemo. I'm whiter & whiter every time I get my hair cut. Hair: we all have it or had it.

A little boy was looking through his family album & asked his mother: "Who's the guy on the beach with you & all the muscles & curly hair?" "That's your father," said his mom. "Then who's the bald-headed guy who lives in us now?"

You might like Dolly Parton's answer when someone asked her, "How do you feel about bald men?" Dolly said, "I love bald men. Just because you've lost your fuzzy, doesn't mean you're not a peach."

Wally also said, when asked about blonde jokes "I'm not offended."

by all the dumb blonde jokes because I know I'm not ~~blonde~~^{dumb}, and I also know that I'm not blonde."

Well, regardless of whether you have hair or not or the color of your hair, Jesus says that "not a hair of our heads will perish. Let's look at how that's good news."

Jesus + his disciples had finally arrived in Jerusalem. The disciples were admiring the beauty of the temple, one of the great wonders of the ancient world. It was a massive structure, a tremendous symbol of national pride. No sports structure in America today comes close in size + splendor to the temple at Jerusalem. The smallest stones in the walls weighed 2-3 tons. Many of them weighed 50 tons. The Temple was many, many times larger than any building the disciples had ever seen. It could hold a quarter of a million people in the courtyard. All of them were amazed. Luke has Jesus predict that this magnificent Temple would one day come tumbling down. "Not one stone

will be left on another, every one of them
will be thrown down."

We know now that Luke was written
after the Temple was destroyed. The
Temple came down in 70 AD, about
40 years after Jesus died, about the
time Luke was writing about Jesus,
so, of course, he knew how it had
fallen. Titus, a Roman general,
with 80,000 men, set siege to Jerusalem.
It was a difficult city to take, set on
a hill & defended to the death. When
the siege was successful & the city
was taken, Titus ordered the whole
city & the temple to be razed to the
ground. Josephus, the historian, was
actually there, & tells us that 97,000
residents of the city were taken captive
and that more than a million died.
All that remains of the Temple now is a
portion of the retaining wall, called
the Western Wall or the Wailing Wall.
It is the holiest prayer spot for Jews
in present day Jerusalem.
Those of his followers who were

still alive when the Temple fell, remembered that Jesus predicted it would, but at the time the disciples listened in disbelief. It was unbelievable. "Teacher" they asked, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?"

Jesus had no use for those who were continually looking for signs. He replied, "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming 'I am he' and 'the time is near.' Do not follow them. When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away."

Then he said, "Nations will rise up against nations, & kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines, & pestilences in various places, & fearful events & great signs from heaven."

There are churches that will try to convince you that he was talking about our time. Jesus could have been talking about

any time in recorded history. There have always been wars & rumors of wars. There have always been "earthquakes, famines & pestilences in various places." Nothing has changed.

Imagine that you were alive during the Middle Ages. Jack of pestilence! The Black Death, actually, bubonic plague, killed one-third of Europe's population. 25,000,000 people died in just under five years between 1347 and 1352. Successive waves of Black Death followed in the next couple of centuries. People of the time interpreted this as the 4th Horseman of the Apocalypse written about in Revelation. This horseman was Death, who would kill $\frac{1}{4}$ of humanity by disease.

I lived through the Great Depression & WWII when parts of the world all over ~~the~~ $\frac{1}{5}$ of the continents were at war - North America, Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, including Burma, India, China, Japan, the US, England, Germany, France, Russia, name it &

There was war. Everyone quoted Nostradamus who had pegged that the war would end on Yap Island in the Pacific. It ended when Japan was atomic bombed & realized it could not go on fighting as he totally destroyed.

What Jesus said was, "Don't let people mislead you." Every century has had wars & rumors of war. Jesus just wanted his disciples to know that things were going to be tough. Luke had already seen some of it. Paul had died in it.

By this time, the disciples were probably regretting having said anything about the temple. Then Jesus reverses himself. He speaks these comforting words, "But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life."

Jesus is telling his disciples & he is telling us, that the future is filled with uncertainties. Lots of things are uncertain. Will SS + Disability run out of money? Some say it already has!

Well, that's pretty ~~trivial~~ ^{trivial} against the persecution the early Christians went through. It may not be the same as torture, the lions + the gladiators, but it's still scary if you depend on it.

What about terrorist attacks? Probably of some kind. We can't stop every mad bomber or misguided but sincere believer in the world.

What about the stock market or losing your home because of market manipulations? Recessions are just as much a part of Capitalism as is profit + loss. It's not a matter of if - it's a matter of when. Will we fall into another Great Depression? Unless there is some kind of regulation we could.

What about on a personal level? What more can your doctor say? Could you have a tragic accident. It's life + life is unpredictable. No one knows what the future holds. There was a poster that appeared in the 60's. "Life is hard + then you die!"

Well, it's not that bad. But life is unpredictable.

~~But~~ But there is good news. God is with us, in good times & bad, there is one who never forgets or forsakes us.

When Jesus warned his disciples that they would be persecuted, he also made an interesting promise: He said, "they will deliver you to synagogues & prisons & you will be brought before kings & governors & all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words & wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict."

In 1974, when I was student clergy at NY and the Gay Pride movement was in its infancy, I was asked to speak for UCC NY at the city council & testify for the first step in equality - equal jobs & housing in NY. ^{pastors} Rabbis spoke against us, priests & evangelical pastors testified against us. I was new to gay rights, I

wasn't even at the beginning of my training as a minister + I was one of the very few gay people speaking. I was scared, but that scripture came to mind. We didn't win. ~~BB~~ Missy, who was about 8 was crying that the city council vote had gone against us, but as we came out of the chamber, a woman city counselor saw Missy crying + stopped to talk to us. She knelt down + hugged Missy + said, "the system didn't work tonight, but one day it will + you will see how good God is." And my has one of the fairest gay rights laws in America + will probably have gay marriage within a year or two.

When Jesus said, "do not prepare a defense in advance" he suggests that he will give them the words to say. He is saying that he will be with them + will not abandon them. And he has always been. Throughout the years, God has given us a way to answer our critics + say the right thing.

In the same way, in times of difficulty, we need to keep our gaze fixed on X's promise. In times of distress God is $\bar{c}$ us. Life is unpredictable, but God is $\bar{c}$ us. In good times or bad, One is $\bar{c}$ us who never forgets or forsakes us.

Then X says: "Not a hair of your head will perish! By standing firm you will gain life!"

When Jesus said that not a hair of our head will perish, he didn't mean that our bodies wouldn't suffer. He did not promise that we would be exempt from catastrophes.

What he meant was this: we will not perish forever. That is, we will not have taken from us anything that is really important to us. Not forever, we may suffer loss, but all loss is temporary. God's power is greater than any power that would crush us.

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale was my pastor when I was a child. He once told of encountering a hurricane while on a cruise in the Atlantic. After the captain managed to sail around the danger, he + Dr. Peale were talking together. The captain said he had

* Go out + put
your hand into
the hand of God.
Amen

always lived by a simple philosophy
that if the sea is smooth, it will get
rough; and if it is rough it will get
smooth. He added something worth
remembering, "But $\bar{c}$ a good ship, you
can always ride it out."

Our ship is our faith in God. $\bar{c}$ a good
ship you can always ride it out. God is
 $\bar{c}$ us. Not a hair on our head will perish.
"Life is difficult, God is merciful, Heaven
is sure."

Last Saturday I had a chance to speak
at the MCC Leadership Conference in Atlanta.
I had the "commissioning prayer" -
actually the benediction. I remembered
a poem that Queen Eliz's father quoted
in his $\bar{c}$ mas speech to the empire jist
before WW II. "I said to the man who stood
at the gate of the year 'Give me a sign
that I might tread safely into the unknown'.
and he said 'Go out + put your hand into
the hand of God. That shall be better to
you than a light + ~~safer~~ safer than a
known way.' " "Life is difficult, God is
merciful, Heaven is sure," ~~that's it~~

* The best + great
after lunch with
the family of women

always lived up to a high philosophy
that of the man is a woman, it will get
better; and if it is not, it will get
worse. He added the other two words
remembering, "But a good ship, you
can always find it out."

Even ship is a perfect in the, a good
ship can always take it out. It is
in the ship to run fast in the water.
It is difficult to find a perfect ship
in the world.

For a woman, I had a chance to speak
at the New York City Conference on October
I had the "Commission on the
Status of the Woman" as a topic
a theme that I had a chance to speak
in this house, which is the center of
the world. I said to the men, "You should
at least to the year, this was a big
the night, they really made the conference
and we had the real + great people here
the kind of this, the place is better to
have them to help + support each other
in the world." "It is difficult to find a
perfect ship in the world."

Advent 2
12/5/10

There will Be Peace

Isaiah 11: 1-10

Romans 15: 4-13

Matthew 3: 1-12

Years ago - many years ago - there was a comedy team called Laurel + Hardy. They were unique, even tho' they were slapstick, & they showed a remarkable understanding of human nature.

There was a Laurel + Hardy movie called "Big Business." Stan + Ollie are Xmas tree salesmen, going house-to-house in a Model T truck selling trees. The story begins innocently enough, with a touch of Xmas spirit + good cheer. Things deteriorate considerably.

Stan + Ollie come to the door of a homeowner who has no Xmas spirit + hates door-to-door salesmen. He is not interested in a tree.

When he slams the door in their faces, a tree bough gets caught in the door jamb. Ollie rings the bell for the irritated homeowner to open the door + release the branch. As Stan is explaining the reason for the second intrusion.

the man slams the door + catches Stan's coat in the door. Again, they ring the doorbell + as Stan is apologizing, the incensed homeowner slams the door + once again catches a branch. When the incensed homeowner comes to the door a fifth time, he brings clippers, with which he cuts up the tree + tosses it on the lawn.

Stan concludes, "I don't think he wants a tree."

By this time, Ollie is furious. He pulls the man's doorbell off the wall. When the dismayed homeowner picks up the phone to call the police, Ollie cuts the wire to the phone as well. The conflict escalates into a debacle where the homeowner destroys Stan + Ollie's truck + trees, piece by piece, while Stan + Ollie destroy the house + shrubbery, piece by piece. An "eye for an eye" + "a tooth for a tooth" wins the day. What had started out as "Merry Xmas" ends up in two piles of rubble.

Sometimes what happens between individuals also happens in nations. Today's words from Isaiah are some of the most beautiful words ever written about humanity's longing for peace. Isaiah writes:

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse... The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the Spirit of wisdom & understanding, the Spirit of Counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge & the fear of the Lord... with righteousness as he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth... The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf & the lion & the yearling together; & a little child will lead them. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, & the young child will put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

In other words, Isaiah says, when the Messiah comes in all his fullness, all people will live in peace & dignity & love together. This is where the world is heading. The birth of Jesus ^{was} ~~will be~~ the beginning of a grand & glorious invasion of divine love.

The seed of the dominion of peace & love has been planted. The love of a tiny infant will someday overcome all the anger & hostility & hatred that reside in human hearts & we shall, in that day, know that we are all brothers & sisters in X. All the people across this globe will live in peace & dignity together.

That's Isaiah's message to us today. Even tho' people are dying in faraway places like Iraq & Afghanistan, there will come a time when war will be ^{more} no more.

War is a terrible thing. I was born 11 years after WWII ended. When I was 6 Italy invaded Ethiopia. I can't remember when there hasn't been a war somewhere since then. Sherman was right, "war is hell." Someone once said, "war never decides who's right, only who's left."

An elderly man saw some 6+7 y.o.'s at play & asked, "what are you playing?" "War" responded the kids. "Why don't you play peace instead," said the man. The children stopped, put their heads together, discussed something among themselves,

looked puzzled & finally ran out of words. One of them went to the elderly man & asked, "Grandpa, how do you play peace? We don't know the game." We've been at war so long that we don't even know how to play peace.

I live ~~in~~ where Crestwood meets Woodlawn. Every year people are killed or hurt by falling bullets. Every December police remind revelers not to fire pistols in the air to celebrate. "lots of people are seriously hurt when bullets fall on their heads." The tradition of shooting in the air is a very dangerous practice. It seems critical, but to me there is something very unsettling about firing guns in the air to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace.

When the Messiah comes war will be no more. That has always been the hope & prayer of the people called Christians. The testimony of the Scriptures is that there will come a time when all of God's people will realize that in X, we are all the children of God & as such are brothers & sisters.

Artificial boundaries will cease to exist. We are all part of one kingdom, the kingdom of God.

The early Christians did not bear arms. They believed God would soon straighten out the world & they should follow X's example & lay down their lives for the world. However, as time passed & X did not return as quickly as they expected, they began to moderate their views on war. They decided that sometimes it is necessary to don armor & fight in order to keep evil people from forcing their will on the weak & innocent. At such times it is permissible to take up arms, but this should always be the last resort. War is always the last option available. But Jesus taught us to always look for ways to be peacemakers. Furthermore, we should always look for the day when the Messiah comes for the last time & "the wolf will lie with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf & the lion & the yearling together, & a little child will lead them."

What a perfect picture of times. When the Messiah comes there will be no more war.

Until the day when X reigns over all the

world, let us do all in our power to bring peace + justice to our little corner of the world.

An unknown author wrote this, which he called "a letter from Jesus about Xmas".

"It has come to my attention," Jesus begins, "that many of you are upset because they are taking my name out of the season, how I personally feel about this celebration can probably be most easily understood by those of you who have been blessed with children. I don't care what you call the day.

If you want to celebrate my birthday, just get along + love one another!

"Now, having said that, let me go on. If it bothers you that the town in which you live doesn't allow a scene depicting my birth, then just get rid of a couple of Santas and snowmen, and put up a small nativity scene on your own front lawn. If all my followers did that, there wouldn't be any need for such a scene on the town square because there would be

so many all over town.

"Stop worrying about the fact that people are calling it a holiday or seasonal tree instead of a Ymas tree.

My parent made all trees. You can remember me any time you see any tree. Decorate a grape vine if you wish; I actually spoke of that one in a teaching, explaining who I am + what each of our tasks are. I am the vine + you are the branches.

"If you want to ~~to~~ give me a present ~~objecting to the~~ in remembrance of my birth, here's my wish list:

1. Instead of letters of protest objecting to the way my birthday is being celebrated, write letters of love + hope to soldiers away from home. They are terribly afraid + lonely this time of year. I know, they tell me all the time. (Write pastor Robert + tell him you are thinking of him + the children.) Send him a few dollars for the kids.

2. Visit someone in a nursing home. You don't have to know them personally. They just need to know someone cares about them.

3. Instead of writing to the President to complain about the way he's doing his job, write + tell him you'll be praying for him + the girls. Then follow up. It will be nice hearing from you again.

4. Instead of giving people a lot of gifts they don't need + you can't afford, spend some time $\bar{c}$ them. Retell the story of my birth + why I came to live $\bar{c}$ you down here. Hug them + remind them that God + I love them.

5. Pick someone who has hurt you in the past + forgive him or her.

6. Did you know that someone here in B'ham will attempt suicide this Xmas because they feel so alone + hopeless. It may be a gay teen. Tell them that things will get better, they always do. Since you may not know who they are, try giving everyone you meet a warm smile, it could make a difference.

7. Instead of nit-picking $\bar{c}$ the retailers who

don't let their employees wish you "merry Xmas", be patient w/ the people who work there. Give them a smile + a kind word. Wish them a "merry Xmas". Then stop shopping there on Sunday. If the store doesn't make money on Sunday they'll stop staying open, & let their employees spend the day at home, at church & w/ their families.

8. Bring some canned goods for the Methodist food bank. Some poor families depends on what the food bank gives them + Heaven knows we're pretty well fed.

10. Finally, if you want to make a statement about your beliefs + loyalty to me, then behave like a Xian. Don't do things in secret that you wouldn't do in my presence. Let people know by your actions that you belong to me.

Don't forget — I am God & can take care of myself. Just love me + do what I have asked you to do. I'll take care of the rest.

Check out the list and get to work;
time is short. I'll help you, but it's up
to you now.

And do have a most blessed Xmas with
all those you love + remember... &
love you. Jesus.

Stan Laurel + Oliver Hardy escalated a
simple attempt at a sale of a Xmas tree
to a horribly insane + destructive
conflict. X wants us to ^{just} do the opposite.
X wants us to escalate the peace +
love of Xmas until it leads to a
world of tranquility for all of God's
people. Will you do your part. Will
each of us.

Amen.

[illegible]



In Memory

*“A new command I give you: Love one another.
As I have loved you, so you must love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my
disciples, if you love one another.”*

John 13: 34-35

Mr. Billy Joe Smith

July 9, 1964 – August 12, 2014

Graveside Services

2 P.M. Sunday, August 17, 2014

Cherokee Memory Gardens

Clergy

Rev. Marge Ragona

Survivors

Aunts: Lorine Laney, Clara Bell Leach

Several Cousins

Beloved pets: Joey Dog and Lucky Dog

SeaHorse

Beach Resort



2010 - 2011





Beautiful waterfront condominium located on 500' of private beach on the Gulf of Mexico. Heated pool at waterside. All units are individually decorated and include full kitchens with central heat and air conditioning.

PAYMENT

We accept Visa, MasterCard, Discover and American Express. Checks are only accepted for deposits. **Checks not accepted at check-in.**

DEPOSITS

<u>In Season:</u>	
1-6 days	1 day deposit
7-13 days	\$250.00 deposit
14 or more days	\$500.00 deposit

Off Season: 1 day deposit

Balance due upon arrival.

CANCELLATIONS/REFUNDS

No refunds for **early departures** for any reason.

Prior to arrival:

Inside 14 days	No refunds
Outside 14 days	\$50.00 service charge

HOUSEKEEPING

You will receive clean towels everyday and have any trash removed. If you are staying with us for one week or more you will receive cleaning mid week.

ARRIVAL/DEPARTURE

Check-In 3:00 P.M. ✦ Check-Out 11:00 a.m.

If you arrive after 5:00 p.m. you may pick up your arrival envelope in the white mailbox located next to the office door. Please register at the office the following morning. Management cannot guarantee specific unit numbers.

AREA INFORMATION

We are located just 10 minutes from the center of Sarasota and only 5 miles from the world renown St. Armands Circle. At the circle you will find exclusive boutiques, and restaurants. Sarasota is known as the cultural center of Florida and offers theatre, opera, museums and cultural events year round.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Due to limited parking: only 1 space per unit except 2 for a 2 bedroom. No boats, personal watercraft, RV's, or trailers. Sorry, NO PETS allowed. **Wireless internet access in all units.** Computer available for **adult** guests in lobby.

Cable TV, 2 guest laundries, pac-n-plays available for rental. Direct dial telephone service with answering machine in all units. Fax and copy service for a small fee. Restaurants, shopping, golf, tennis, boating & bike rental nearby. **All units smoke free. If you choose to smoke, there will be a \$100 cleaning charge.**

At the SeaHorse you will enjoy a quiet private atmosphere at this exclusive spot on the island of Longboat Key. You can enjoy a stroll on one of the most beautiful beaches in the world or sit at the waters edge and enjoy the view. Whether you are on your patio, the beach or at the pool, you can take in some of the most spectacular sunsets you will ever see.



Sample of a Studio



Sample of a One Bedroom



Sample of a Two Bedroom



Loft

Rm 225

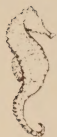


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SeaHorse Beach Resort

Longboat Key, Fl 866-383-2417

2010 Rates

Studio

2 Persons Max.

Bedroom/living area, Kitchen, 1 bath

Loft

6 Persons Max.

Open living room, Bedroom, Kitchen, Dining, 1 bath

Dec.22-Jan. 31

Feb.1-April 14

April 15-Dec.21

Daily \$145

\$190

\$130

Weekly \$914

\$1,197

\$819

One Bedroom

4 Persons Max.

Living room, Bedroom, Kitchen, Dining, 1 bath

Dec.22-Jan. 31

Feb.1-April 14

April 15-Dec.21

Daily \$170

\$225

\$150

Weekly \$1,071

\$1,418

\$945

One Bedroom Deluxe

4 Persons Max.

Living room, Bedroom, Kitchen, Dining, 1 bath

Dec.22-Jan. 31

Feb.1-April 14

April 15-Dec.21

Daily \$180

\$235

\$160

Weekly \$1,134

\$1,481

\$1,008

2 Bedroom

6 Persons Max.

Living Room, 2 bedrooms, Kitchen, Dining, 2 bath

Dec.22-Jan. 31

Feb.1-April 14

April 15-Dec.21

Daily \$240

\$290

\$230

Weekly \$1,512

\$1,827

\$1,449

All rates are subject to change without notice. All rates are subject to Florida taxes. Special rates apply for holidays.

Management reserves the right to transfer your reservation to another unit if necessary. Your deposit payment is your acceptance of our payment and cancellation policies.



SeaHorse Beach Resort

Longboat Key, Fl 866-383-2417

2011 Rates

Studio

2 Persons Max.

Bedroom/living area, Kitchen, 1 bath

Loft

6 Persons Max.

Open living room, Bedroom, Kitchen, Dining, 1 bath

Dec.22-Jan. 31

Feb.1-April 30

May 1 -Dec.21

Daily \$150

\$195

\$135

Weekly \$945

\$1,229

\$851

One Bedroom

4 Persons Max.

Living room, Bedroom, Kitchen, Dining, 1 bath

Dec.22-Jan. 31

Feb.1-April 30

May 1 -Dec.21

Daily \$175

\$230

\$155

Weekly \$1,103

\$1,449

\$977

One Bedroom Deluxe

4 Persons Max.

Living room, Bedroom, Kitchen, Dining, 1 bath

Dec.22-Jan. 31

Feb.1-April 30

May 1 -Dec.21

Daily \$185

\$240

\$165

Weekly \$1,166

\$1,512

\$1,040

2 Bedroom

6 Persons Max.

Living Room, 2 bedrooms, Kitchen, Dining, 2 bath

Dec.22-Jan. 31

Feb.1-April 30

May 1 -Dec.21

Daily \$245

\$295

\$235

Weekly \$1,544

\$1,859

\$1,481

All rates are subject to change without notice. All rates are subject to Florida taxes. Special rates apply for holidays.

Management reserves the right to transfer your reservation to another unit if necessary. Your deposit payment is your acceptance of our payment and cancellation policies.

December 16, 2007⁹

Dear Shirley,

I should have apologized to you years ago. You are the first person I should have addressed after I realized my monumental stupidity, for I had sinned against you primarily, and yet I didn't - Shirley, I was appalled by my own behavior. I am so sorry.

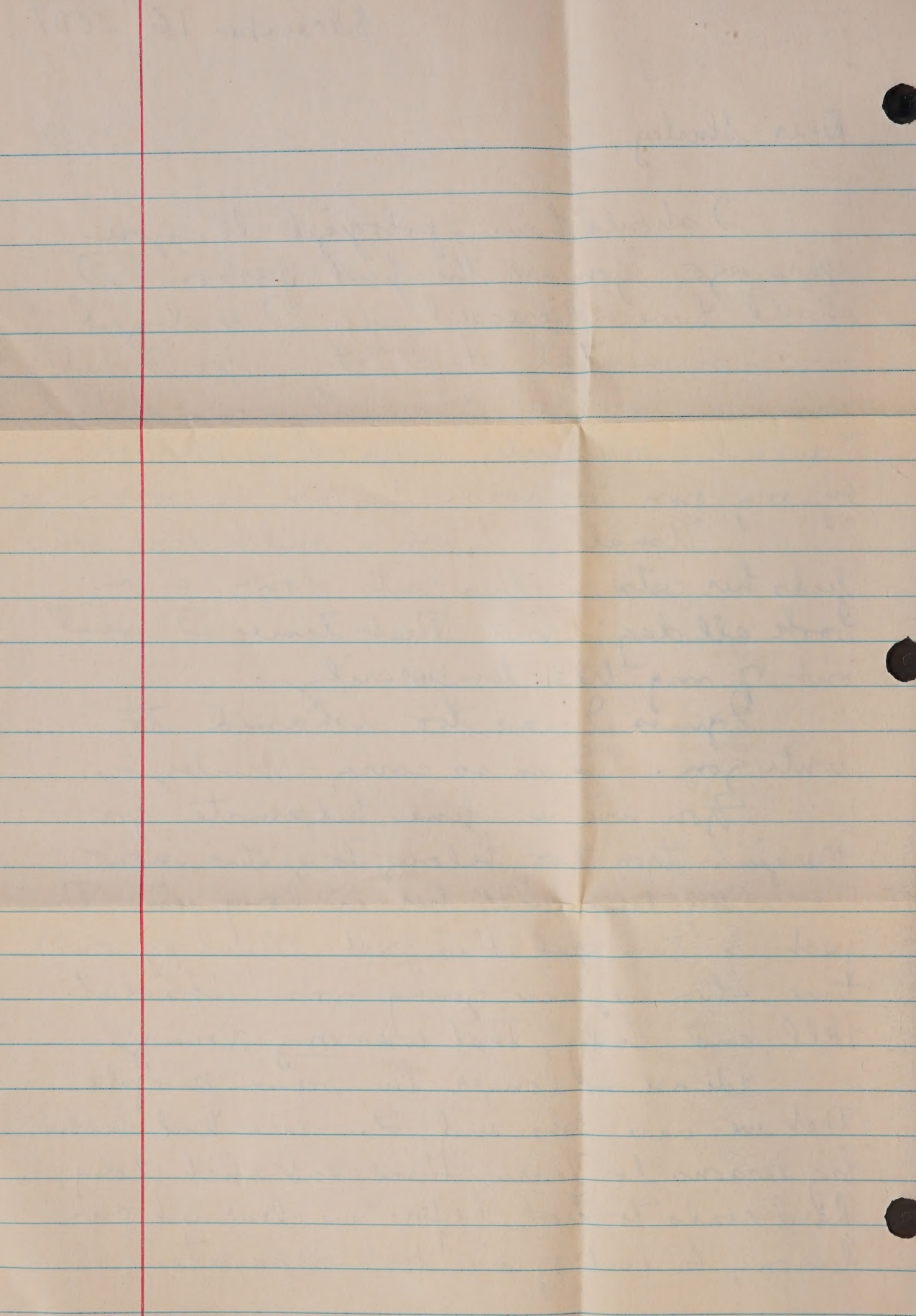
Usually, I am a mild soul who feeds her cats & then sits down & a book all day; but that time I went out of my tree temporarily.

I guess I was too ashamed to write you. I am so sorry, Shirley.

You are a fine helpmate for Margie. You two belong together now.

My times with her is long in the past, & I am glad it is past. Much of our time when we were young was Absolute Hell, and Shirley, that was my doing.

We are no longer the same people that we were, she and I. We had such big lessons to learn then, and such long, hard roads to trod before we learned our lessons, & each of us took separate



routes, but Thank God, we have both learned our lessons — which I believe are fashioned for us by God before we come into this life — and, Thank God, we have both survived.

I never had the chance to know you, Shirley. And I am so sorry.

Perhaps I will before one of us has to go to the other side.

I heard from Margie that the work you have done is fascinating — at least, it is fascinating to me, and I only learned about it after you had left New Orleans.

I have made Huge, Enormous mistakes in the past 10 or 12 years. Not romantic ones, just Big Ones that cost me so dearly I cannot believe the price I paid. I am learning very late in life, and sometimes the cost is unbelievable to me; but at least I am learning.

My best wishes for a good and happy life.

Charlene

